

# The Word, the Spirit and the Church

## THE WORD

Examination of the book of the Acts of the Apostles reveals the high priority placed on preaching 'the word'. Thus,

...many of those who heard the word believed; (Acts 4:4)

And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness (Acts 4:29)

When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:31)

And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup>Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, <sup>4</sup>while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." ... <sup>7</sup>The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:2-4, 7)

Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. (Acts 8:4)

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. (Acts 8:14)

You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. (Acts 8:21)<sup>1</sup>

Now after Peter and John had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans. (Acts 8:25)

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. (Acts 10:44)

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. (Acts 11:1)

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. (Acts 11:19)

But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents. (Acts 12:24)

When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John also to assist them. (Acts 13:5)

He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. (Acts 13:7)

"My brothers, you descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message (lovgo", *logos*) of this salvation has been sent. (Acts 13:26)

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, 'You have no part or share in this word (lovgo", *logos*). Although here lovgo" is generally treated as equivalent to 'thing' or 'matter' (cf. 15:6) it may possibly refer to the 'word' which Philip had earlier preached and whose power Simon wanted to possess.

The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. (Acts 13:44)

Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles...' (Acts 13:46)

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. <sup>49</sup>Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region. (Acts 13:48-49)

So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who testified to the word of his grace by granting signs and wonders to be done through them. (Acts 14:3)

Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. (Acts 14:12)<sup>2</sup>

When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. (Acts 14:25)

Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news<sup>3</sup> and become believers. . . ." (Acts 15:7)

But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord. (Acts 15:35)

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." (Acts 15:36)

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. (Acts 16:6)

They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. (Acts 16:32)

These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message (lovgo", *logos*) very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11)

But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. (Acts 17:13)

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word<sup>4</sup>, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. (Acts 18:5)

He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. (Acts 18:11)

This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord. (Acts 19:10)

So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed. (Acts 19:20)

On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking<sup>5</sup> until midnight. (Acts 20:7)

And now I commend you to God and to the message (lovgo"/) of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. (Acts 20:32)

This list is most impressive, quite apart from its length, because it demonstrates the strong emphasis on the true focus of the early church. About thirty five or so times

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<sup>2</sup> Literally, Paul was 'the leader of the word'; that is, the description still identifies the message as a 'word' albeit misunderstood as coming from the 'gods'.

<sup>3</sup> Literally, 'the word of the gospel'.

<sup>4</sup> Literally, 'occupied with the word'.

<sup>5</sup> Literally, 'he extended the word'.

Luke records that it was the ‘word’, either ‘of God’ or ‘of the Lord’, this latter often being identified with the Lord Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

Nor is it only in Luke that we find this stress. Paul often uses the word ‘word’ to describe his message, indicating that it was far more than *his* message alone. He told the Thessalonians that ‘when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is at work in you believers’ (1 Thess. 2:13).

Could it be that the point of all this is that what we see in the New Testament descriptions is the powerful initiative and action of, and response to, revelation. It almost seems that, while some mention is made of the response of some of the first believers, this side is somewhat ‘played down’. However, a more likely explanation than the human element being played down might be that the writers are really ‘telling it as it is’. Contrary to much contemporary discussion, the writers of the New Testament are far more concerned to record the actions of God.

Repentance and faith, for example, two sides of the one coin, are both presented as the gift of God (Acts 5:31; 11:18; Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Tim. 1:14). The dynamic of the gospel is likewise found in its revelatory character (Rom. 1:16-17). Quite explicitly, the human element in proclamation is not considered when the saving power of the gospel is discussed (1 Cor. 1:17 — 2:5). As noted above, ‘When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region’ (Acts 13:48-49).

There is, of course, a view which regards ‘the word of God’ as descriptive of the content of the message, that is, as the word *about* God. But, while a popular position among some evangelicals, this view stands in contrast to the overall thrust of the scriptures and to some of the specific statements within the scriptures. Certainly it would be inappropriate to equate the scriptures themselves as ‘the word’ in this context.

In order to appreciate the force of the language of Acts we must understand that ‘the word of God/Lord’ etc is foundational to all our knowledge of God. Barth put it:

Before human thought and speech can respond to God’s word, they have to be summoned into existence and given reality by the creative act of God’s word. Without the *precedence* of the creative Word, there can be not only no proper theology but, in fact, no evangelical theology at all.<sup>7</sup>

The major factor in all this is that while the word of God is *propositional*, it is so because it is first *personal*. That is, it is not *only* propositional. Barth continues:

The Word is the *Word of God*. . . . The Word of God is the Word that God *spoke, speaks, and will speak* in the midst of all men.<sup>8</sup>

The power of the word is the power of God himself, since it is him speaking. In creation, both in its beginning and in its preservation, we see the power of the word as God himself brings all things into being and preserves them in accordance with his own plan and purpose. Put another way, the word of God is not some *ad hoc* element but rather, as the word *of God*, inseparable from God, it is always intimately related to the purposes of God. If God has a plan, and we know nothing of God apart from such, then the word as it is spoken not only reveals the plan to us but actually effects it.

Now, while all this may be relatively obvious from the pages of the scriptures, it is

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<sup>6</sup> See Acts 20:35 and the study, ‘*The Words and the Word of Jesus*’ p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, (1963) 1979, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Evangelical Theology*, p. 18.

the personal confrontation by the Word become flesh which makes it inescapable. The word spoken to men and women confronts them in such a way as to bring them into an intimacy with the eternal Word himself. Hence John wrote,

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life —<sup>2</sup>this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us —<sup>3</sup>we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)

The language of Acts concerning ‘the word’, whether it be ‘the word of God’ or ‘the Word of the Lord’, is plainly not referring to the content alone. It is, of course, saying that what concerned the apostles and the disciples was a clear exposition, though, as Barth insists, never their interpretation, of all that God had done. They could not but speak of all they had seen and heard. But their function was not that of story-tellers. On the contrary, they were, as passive witnesses of the Word, active witnesses of the Word. This was in-line with the prophetic nature of the early church and consistent with the prophetic line which had been the means by which God had spoken to men and women ever since their initial, pre-fall, intimacy was broken (cf. Luke 11:50f). The contents of Acts concerns all that Jesus, the Word (although this is not a title used by Luke), continues to do and to teach (Acts 1:1).

With this in view, the church must be seen as one with the Word, as the Word is one with the eternal purposes of God. Not surprisingly, then, the only indication as to when the close of the age will come is given in terms of the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom:

And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come. (Matt. 24:14)

## THE WORD AND THE SPIRIT

If we speak of the Word bringing about the eternal purposes of God then we must say that the ideas of ‘witness’ and ‘mission’ are central to an understanding of the church. In his book, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*,<sup>9</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof has demonstrated that mission is logically prior to the church, even if not chronologically so. Whereas mission today is usually relegated to the realm of the obligation of the church, so the gift of the Spirit is treated as the one who empowers believers for their task. Berkhof writes:

... I regret to say that the highly necessary enrichment of systematic theology by taking in the mission as an essential element in God’s mighty deeds is still ahead of us.

The bad consequences of this are most keenly felt in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In Roman Catholic theology, the Spirit is mainly the soul and sustainer of the church. In Protestant theology he is mainly the awakener of individual spiritual life in justification and sanctification. So the Spirit is either institutionalized or individualized. And both of these opposite approaches are conceived in a common pattern of an introverted and static pneumatology. The Spirit in this way is the builder of the church and the edifier of the faithful, *but not the great mover and driving power on the way from the One to the many, from Christ to the world.*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1976, p. 30f.

<sup>10</sup> *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, p. 33, emphasis added.

By mission, therefore, we must mean more than the task of the church. We must instead understand mission as relating to the true being of God and not merely as something which may be a good thing to have. Without mission we cannot understand the full nature of the Trinity as that has been revealed. We cannot, of course, go beyond or behind that (see Deut. 29:29).

In John 6:37, Jesus declared that ‘Everything that the Father gives me will come to me’, and Paul reminded the Ephesians of ‘*his* glorious inheritance among the saints’ (1:18). While the antecedent of ‘his’ is ‘God’ (verse 17), it is plain that God the Father has chosen us ‘in him’ that is, in Christ and for Christ. Thus Col. 1:15-16,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup>for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him.

Within the ‘family’ of the Godhead, the Father has given all creation to the Son. Psalm 2, facing the hostility of the nations and their rulers, is confident in the knowledge that the nations are the Son’s inheritance and the ends of the earth his possession. He has only to ask the Father to receive the inheritance (surely the implication of Jesus’ rejection of Satan’s ‘offer’ in the wilderness, Matt. 4:8-10).

The various ‘mission’ statements in the New Testament are to be seen in this light. Matthew records it as

And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’ (28:18-20)

The promise “I am with you always’ is not for the assistance of the disciples; on the contrary, his presence is the central issue. He is present because he is about the business of gaining his inheritance. The point is that he will gain it by means of the disciples, but *he* will gain it. The long ending of Mark adds that ‘they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message (lovgo" *logos*) by the signs that accompanied it’ (16:20). The shorter ending of Mark puts it this way: ‘. . . afterwards Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation (*khvrugma kerugma*) of eternal salvation.’

Luke, however, both in the Gospel and the Acts, adds that their testimony (or, his testimony through them) would be dependent on their receiving the Holy Spirit (so Luke 24:48-49; Acts 1:8). John’s Gospel confirms this:

‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’ (John 20:21-23)

This Johannine version spells out the fact that the mission of the disciples cannot be understood except in the light of his mission. He sends as he himself is sent.

The full account in Luke 24 is instructive in this matter. Verses 46-48 state:

“. . . it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup>and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup>You are witnesses of these things.”

There is no command as such here; it is simply that these things will take place and that the disciples are witnesses. Now while various scriptures may be cited to back up the claim that ‘it is written’, we should note that almost at the commencement of his ministry, when he went to the synagogue at Nazareth (Lu. 4:18-19), Jesus quoted Isaiah

61:1-2, where (i) the same Greek words are used of the ministry of the Messiah as that described in Luke 24, ‘forgiveness’ and ‘release’ both translating the same word, (ii) both occasions, perhaps not surprisingly, use the verb ‘to proclaim’ in that connection and (iii) both occasions link the proclamation of release and forgiveness with the gift of the Spirit.

What is being observed here is that the gift of the Spirit for the disciples is inseparable from the gift of the Spirit for their Master. For him to accomplish his task *he* must have the Spirit. There can be no messianic claim to the nations apart from the anointing (the meaning of the title Messiah is ‘anointed one’) of the Son. Hence the events of Jesus’ baptism.<sup>11</sup> The Word is taking his stand and the Spirit is the enabling one, by whom the Word will accomplish his goal.

Returning to the Acts of the Apostles, we see that not only is it the word which triumphs but that it is the Spirit who is active alongside the word.

... he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. (Acts 1:2)

“John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. . . .<sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:5, 8)

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:4)

‘In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup>Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. (Acts 2:33)

Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)

This list could well be extended in a similar way to the list of the instances of the use of ‘the word’ above. But it is quickly obvious that the Word himself, working with the Spirit prior to the incarnation, now as the Word become flesh works with and through the Spirit for the accomplishment of the goal of God. The various gifts of the Spirit described in the accounts of the early church, whether we call them ministry gifts or whatever, find their rationale in the eternal purpose of God as outworked by the Word and the Spirit. Signs and wonders, while performed through human agents (Acts 2:43), are nothing less than the dynamic testimony of the Lord to the word of his grace (Acts 14:3; cf. Heb. 2:3-4). As gifts to the church, the various functions are for the work of ministry, but the goal of this ministry is the whole body fully functional in Christ (Eph. 4:11-16). As such these are ‘manifestations of the Spirit’ and their exercise is energised by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7, 11). In other words, the gifts are, in the ultimate and as used in love and for love, the Spirit in action to bring the inheritance of the Word to its maturity. He allocates the gifts according to his own choosing (1 Cor. 12:11) but he

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<sup>11</sup> Discussions of Jesus’ baptism being an example, or even an identification with humanity, while debatable, become somewhat irrelevant in this light.

does so in full fellowship with the Father and the Son (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

## HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?

Our discussion to this point has presented us with the reality of true ministry, namely that it is the Word and the Spirit together who accomplish all things under the direction of the Father. The growth of the church is the gathering of the inheritance as the 'utterance of Christ' (Rom. 10:17) in concert with the sovereign blowing of the wind of the Spirit (John 3:8) bears fruit. While the Word and the Spirit use human agency to accomplish this, they are by no means dependent upon it. The converse is true; the church is dependent on the Word and the Spirit and the outworking of their goal for its very identity and existence. In the final analysis, while we may describe some as 'church-planters' and honor them for their labors, as with others who faithfully exercise their ministries, it is 'he Lord who adds to the church daily such as are being saved' (Acts 2:47).

The parallel commands, 'go on being filled with the Spirit' (Eph. 5:18) and 'let the word of Christ dwell in you richly' (Col. 3:16), are, then, not primarily for our sakes. The pure joy of such fulness relates to the intimacy of the one who is filled with the one who fills all things. The fulness is not aesthetic but teleological, i.e. we are only filled as we are moving towards the goal, the *telos*.<sup>12</sup> The joy lies in *being*<sup>13</sup> one with the Word and the Spirit in their great joint action within human history and in the hope of the glory of God.

## SERVANTS OF THE WORD AND THE SPIRIT

It is fundamental to the being of the church that it is to serve. Popular terminology, such as a person being 'called into the ministry', while perhaps being somewhat restrictive in the use of the word 'ministry' is a recognition, nonetheless, that true leadership is 'service'. In this it is in line with the descriptions within the Scriptures, such as Hebrews 6:10, 'For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do'.

In 1 Peter 4:10, Peter declares that 'as each has received a gift, use it serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God'. However, in the next sentence (verse 11), he adds, 'if anyone speaks, as the oracles of God; if anyone serves, as from the strength which God supplies'. By this he seems to imply that all gifts are for service, while there may be a specific gift which can be defined as 'serving'. Paul does likewise, in Romans 12:7, where he singles out service (*diakoniva*, *diakonia*) for particular attention. There is also the office of deacon (*diavkono*", *diakonos*, or servant) in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, although apart from this 'job description' we know nothing specific of their role within the church.<sup>14</sup>

However, what is conspicuous is that the majority of the uses of the words 'serve',

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<sup>12</sup> 'No one may expect to be filled with the Spirit if he is not willing to be used for missions.' Andrew Murray (*The Spirit of Christ* Nisbet, London, *nd*, p. 160).

<sup>13</sup> Not 'becoming'.

<sup>14</sup> The usual assumption is that these deacons were the ones first described in Acts 6. There may be, however, good reasons for *not* making this identification, or at least for doing so with some qualifications.

‘servant’ etc. relate not to the service of men and women (except where it is the formal social status of ‘slave’ or ‘servant’ which is being discussed) but to the service of God, of Christ or of the Gospel and so on. The distinction between the general serving and this specific ‘ministry’ can be seen in Acts 6:1-4. Although the translations deal with the passage in various ways, a literal rendering has it that Hellenist widows were being overlooked in the daily *diakonia* (service/ministry, verse 1, cf. Acts 11:29), to which the apostles replied that it was not right for them to serve (*diakoneiḡn*, *diakonein*) tables (verse 2) when they ought to be attending to the service or ministry (*diakoniva*, *diakonia*) of the word.

In Acts 1:17, 25, the apostolic office is seen as a *diakonia*. In Acts 12:24-25, we read that ‘the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents. Then after completing their *diakonia* (NRSV ‘mission’) Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem . . .’. In 20:24, Paul speaks of the *diakonia* (ministry) which he received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God’s grace. In 21:19, he details ‘the things that God had done through his *diakonia*.’

Within the letters, Paul defines his ministry as that of a ‘slave’ (*doulo*”, *doulos*), of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1 cf. Eph. 6:6; 1 Pet. 2:16; Col. 4:12; 2 Tim. 2:24) as do James (1:1), Peter (2 Pet. 1:1) and Jude (1:1). The difference between the *diakonos* and the *doulos* seems to be in the way their service is viewed. The *diakonos* is considered in terms of his work and the *doulos* in terms of the relationship which exists to the master, the latter principally involving a lack of choice.<sup>15</sup> There are other words used for ‘servants’ within the New Testament, but our focus here is on the primary issue that, while believers offer service to one another, their service is to God, Jesus, the Gospel etc. and all other service is the outworking of the first duty.

## **‘WORKING TOGETHER WITH HIM’**

In 2 Corinthians 6:1, Paul wrote, ‘Working together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain’. It is well known that the words ‘in him’ have been added, of necessity in English, by the translators, but while ‘with you’ (i.e. the Corinthians) is possible, both the context and other comments make it reasonably certain that it is God, or Jesus Christ, who is intended. For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul wrote that ‘we are of God fellow-workers’<sup>16</sup> and the context of 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 supports this:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;<sup>19</sup> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.<sup>20</sup> So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

True ministry must then be seen as a participation in the action of God.

As servants of God, the church with its specific ministries can see itself as one with the people of Israel in the Old Testament. Passages such as Exodus 32:13 may have

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1880 (1973), p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> The Greek reads, *qeuḡ gavr ejsmen sunergoiv*. NRSV has ‘We are God’s servants, working together’, changing the RSV ‘(with NIV) ‘we are God’s fellow workers’



some cultural element in them but there are other occasions, such as Leviticus 25:42, 55; which specify Israel as servants of God over against any other claims which may be made against them. Likewise, there are other individuals who are identified as God's servants, especially Moses (Num. 12:7f; Deut. 34:5 Josh. 1:1-2, 7, 13, 15 etc), Caleb (Num 14:24), David (2 Sam. 7:5; 1 Kings 11:13, 32, 34 etc) and the prophets (1 Kings 14:18; 2 Kings 9:7, 14:25; 17:13 etc).

The most conspicuous occurrences of the servant of God appear in the second half of Isaiah, where Israel is called 'my servant (see Isa. 41:8, 9; 43:10 etc), while there is also the Servant, who while Israel is also more than Israel (42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). Here, the service of *the* servant is intimately related with the true role of Israel. It is in this light that the apostles could understand their commission to 'make disciples of all the nations' (Matt. 28:19). The authority has been given to him and with that he goes out to conquer the nations. Hence 'Remember, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Matt. 28:20). The close of the age, it should be recalled, is the point when the whole world has had the gospel of the kingdom preached to it (Matt. 24:14).

The nations are especially in mind in the function of the Servant in Isaiah — 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations' (42:1), and 'I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations' (42:6 cf. 49:1, 6, 7, 22-23; 52:15). The use of Isaiah 42:1 and Psalm 2:7 at Jesus' baptism bear this out, for Psalm 2 also has the conquest of the nations in mind (especially, verses 7-12). No doubt this is understood as the meaning of the baptism, at least by the devil; see Matthew 4:8-9.

As the Servant of the Lord, Jesus has a commission and, having conquered all evil at the cross and having broken through death itself, he now is reigning until he puts all his enemies under his feet. The gospel of the kingdom which is to be preached to the whole world is the proclamation of this reign.

As servants of the Lord, Jesus, the apostles proclaim this gospel, and Paul actually calls himself a servant of the gospel in Ephesians 3:7 and Colossians 1:23. Elsewhere he understands that as a servant he is called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God (Rom. 1:1; cf. 1:9). This service is especially with the nations in view (Rom. 15:16, 1:5).

The service of the church, then, and of its various members, is to be seen as a partnership with Christ in his service of bringing all creation finally under the authority of the Father. What has been called 'the Great Commission' may perhaps better be understood as 'the Great Communion'.

## **THE ACTION OF THE WORD AND SPIRIT**

What we have earlier seen of the present action of the Word and the Spirit in the book of Acts leads us to the conclusion that the church finds its self-understanding only as it is one with the Word and the Spirit in the plan of God. To this extent the church is the eschatological community; it is the community that exists as a visible anticipation of all that lies in the plan of God but which has not yet been unfolded.

If this is so, then the church must be constantly questioning whether its present course of action is not merely consistent with the plan of God but is *one with it*. It is for this reason that the gift of greatest significance for the church is that of prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1ff.). By this gift, the Word himself speaks to the church and the church, having

received the Spirit recognises the lordship of the Word in the church. Indeed, so intimately do they work together in the administration of the plan of God that Paul spoke of the Spirit as ‘the Spirit of the Lord’ while saying ‘the Lord is the Spirit’ (2 Cor. 3:17,18).

Paul’s concern for the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 2:6ff, is that they had become, by their sectarianism, immune to the revelation of the deep things of God. The former immediacy with the Spirit had diminished and been replaced by activities which, while externally corporate, were fundamentally self-centered (see 1 Cor. 11:17-22; 12:3-13:7 etc). By their neglect of the Word they had, in spite of appearances, neglected the Spirit! A similar situation existed in the Ephesian church (paradigm) in Revelation 2:1-7. There the former intimacy with Christ had been left, while the externals of that remained. Christ still walks among the lampstands (v. 1), but they had become cold and indifferent to him (and so, we presume, to each other).

In contrast to this is the picture in Acts of the church in moment by moment intimacy with Christ. The Jewish Council recognised that Peter and John were with Jesus (Acts 4:13) and while the usual way of understanding this is to point to their having been with Jesus during his three year ministry, and so having the same eloquence and power in spite of their being, like him, uneducated and ordinary, earlier, in verse 8, we are told of Peter being ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’. If we understand the fulness of the Spirit as the norm, then it matters little whether this ‘being filled’ refers to Pentecost or to a special filling to both. What is significant is that Peter spoke by the Spirit and it is not impossible to understand the phrase in verse 13 to refer to Peter and John having been ‘with Jesus’ after as well as before Pentecost.

Further, in Acts it is taken as normative that there would be direct communication from ‘the Lord’. Philip is spoken to by ‘an angel of the Lord’ (8:26) and it is the Spirit who told him to go over to the chariot (8:29). (It was also ‘the Spirit of the Lord [who] snatched Philip away’ — verse 39 — however that may have occurred.) The conversion of Saul is attributed to the direct word of Christ (9:4-6) and likewise Ananias was spoken to directly (9:10ff). In Antioch, the Spirit spoke to the gathered prophets and teachers (Acts 13:2) the same thing took place in Acts 16:6, where the Holy Spirit forbade Paul and the others to speak the word in Asia. In the next verse the communication is defined as being by ‘the Spirit of Jesus’.

In Acts 11 and 21 we are told of the prophet Agabus and also in Acts 21:9 of Philip’s ‘four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy’. With the background of the Old Testament prophetic movement, where God spoke through ‘his servants the prophets’, there is no immediate reason to assume that God did not use the prophetic gift when speaking on many of these occasions. Paul told the Corinthians that a genuine prophet<sup>17</sup> in church would inescapably recognise that what he had said was ‘a command of the Lord’ (1 Cor. 14:37). Since he had previously described the proper exercise of the prophetic gifts (1 Cor. 14:29-32), he probably meant that the Corinthians would treat his apostolic word as prophetic and judge accordingly. But whatever the means, there was the expectation that the Word and the Spirit together would lead the church.

It is noteworthy that in Acts 13:1 there are ‘prophets and teachers’ in the church at Antioch, and it is this coupling which is significant. The prophet without the teacher is unrestrained; the teacher without the prophet is confined to the past. But when both

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<sup>17</sup> His phrase is ‘if anyone claims to be a prophet or *pneumatikos*, spiritual, let him recognise...’. The adjective *pneumatikos* (spiritual) is used twenty three times by Paul, fifteen of which are in 1 Corinthians; 2:13(x2); 2:15; 3:1; 9:11; 10:3, 4(x2); 12:1; 14:1; 14:37; 15:44(x2); 15:46(x2). It does not seem unreasonable to assume that this was a word with which the Corinthians were familiar.

function together, the church has the capacity to check whether the prophetic word is genuine and whether the Spirit is indeed speaking to the church. The warning of 1 John 4:1 is doubtless to be understood in this context.

It is of immense pastoral significance that the people of God today, as always, understand these matters. It is not merely that prior to the completion of the canon there was prophecy; the issue is that it is the present lordship of Christ which is being outworked in history, and it is being outworked through the church. Christ is presently working and speaking in, to and through the church. The Spirit of Christ is the one who is energising and sustaining the church. Together they are bringing the goal of the Triune God to fulfilment and the people of God are either in the flow of that fulfilment or they are adrift and aimless, all too often seeking to establish their own purpose by strategies and means.

Unless we recognise that the Word and the Spirit are personally present in the church and working towards the goal of God, and unless we live under the personal lordship of Christ and the Spirit then we will not be 'servants' of God and our various ministries will be such in name only. The warning of Romans 16:17-18 is vital:

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching you have learned; avoid them. <sup>18</sup>For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by their smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded.