

1. God of the Word

Readings: Genesis 1:1-31, John 1:1-5

“We could not utter even a wretched syllable about the ‘how’ of the Word of God, if the Word of God had not been spoken to us as God’s Word, which means spoken to us in such a way that all we think and say about its ‘how’ has its substance not in itself but outside itself in the Word of God, so that what we think and say about this ‘how’ can never become the secret system of a ‘what’.” (Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 5.4.4)

Some **definitions**:

‘God’ - the God that is revealed in the Bible is the Triune God - One God, eternally existing in three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This triune God makes himself known to us as the Holy Spirit comes to us and reveals and enables us to know that the Father sent His Son, who became the man Jesus; this Jesus revealed the character of the Father in his words and actions, as he lived a life of humble and joyful obedience that took him to the cross to die for our sin in order to reconcile us to the Father. The Spirit impresses this truth on our hearts, so that we truly, personally and intimately know the Father through the Son.

‘Word’ - Communication, not just content. Words are pointless and empty unless they are the means of communication between one person and another; words are the expression of relationship.

‘Divine revelation palpitates with human surprise. Like a fiery bolt of lightning that unexpectedly zooms toward us and scores a direct hit, like an earthquake that suddenly shakes and engulfs us, it somersaults our private thoughts to abrupt awareness of ultimate destiny. By the unannounced intrusion of its omnipotent actuality, divine revelation lifts the present into the eternal and unmaskes our pretensions of human omniscience. As if an invisible Concorde had burst the sound barrier overhead, it drives us to ponder whether the Other World has finally pinned us to the ground for a life-and-death response. Confronting us with a sense of cosmic arrest, it makes us ask whether the end of our world is at hand and propels us unasked before the Judge and Lord of the universe. Like some piercing air-raid siren it sends us scurrying from life’s preoccupations and warns us that no escape remains if we neglect the only sure sanctuary. Even once-for-all revelation that has occurred in another time and place fills us with awe and wonder through its ongoing significance and bears the character almost of a fresh miracle.’¹

My goal in these talks is to talk not so much about the ‘what’ as the ‘how’. Asking the ‘what’ question can lead us to thinking we can quantify, categorise, contain and even control God’s Word. Instead, asking the ‘how’ question means that we have to first place ourselves in submission to God, to be ready to listen when He speaks. We need to recognise that ultimately the issue of ‘How does God speak, and what does He say when He speaks?’ is really an issue of authority. Asking the ‘how’ means we need to also ask, ‘Am I willing to listen?’ I can guarantee one thing whenever we read or hear the Scriptures: God will be speaking. So are you ready to listen?

God is the God who speaks.

This may seem like the most obvious thing; however we need to understand that speaking is not merely something God does - He speaks because of who He is.

Genesis 1:1-5 (ff) What do we understand was happening here? To whom/what was God speaking? We should avoid the image of God as the great cosmic magician, who speaks magic/

¹ Carl F.H. Henry, ‘God Revelation and Authority’ Vol 2, p.16

powerful words that make stuff happen, like a conjuror pulling a rabbit out of a hat. The words in themselves have no intrinsic power, otherwise we too could now create universes since we know the magic words God used to do it. The creative power was in two things:

1. That it was God who spoke the words.

Words are the means God uses to do his work; 'When God speaks He acts, and... God acts by speaking'²

²⁶ Behold, God is great, and we know him not; the number of his years is unsearchable. ²⁷ For he draws up the drops of water; they distill his mist in rain, ²⁸ which the skies pour down and drop on mankind abundantly. ²⁹ Can anyone understand the spreading of the clouds, the thunderings of his pavilion? ³⁰ Behold, he scatters his lightning about him and covers the roots of the sea. ³¹ For by these he judges peoples; he gives food in abundance. ³² He covers his hands with the lightning and commands it to strike the mark. ³³ Its crashing declares his presence; the cattle also declare that he rises. ⁰¹ "At this also my heart trembles and leaps out of its place. ⁰² Keep listening to the thunder of his voice and the rumbling that comes from his mouth. ⁰³ Under the whole heaven he lets it go, and his lightning to the corners of the earth. ⁰⁴ After it his voice roars; he thunders with his majestic voice, and he does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard. ⁰⁵ God thunders wondrously with his voice; he does great things that we cannot comprehend. ⁰⁶ For to the snow he says, 'Fall on the earth,' likewise to the downpour, his mighty downpour. ⁰⁷ He seals up the hand of every man, that all men whom he made may know it. ⁰⁸ Then the beasts go into their lairs, and remain in their dens. ⁰⁹ From its chamber comes the whirlwind, and cold from the scattering winds. ¹⁰ By the breath of God ice is given, and the broad waters are frozen fast. ¹¹ He loads the thick cloud with moisture; the clouds scatter his lightning. ¹² They turn around and around by his guidance, to accomplish all that he commands them on the face of the habitable world. ¹³ Whether for correction or for his land or for love, he causes it to happen. ¹⁴ "Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God. (Job 36:26-37:14)

God always speaks purposefully; his words are always full of meaning, and there is always a reason for Him speaking:

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰ "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:8-11)

This passage speaks of the huge difference between our ways and God's ways, our thoughts and God's thoughts; the big difference given here is that God does not just think, but His thoughts issue forth in speaking, and His speaking actually makes things happen.

2. The one to whom He is speaking.

If we understand words to be communication, and communication that is personal, then we see that God creating the universe by speaking is an expression of a personal relationship; the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit. Genesis 1:3 is not the first time that God spoke. Our basis for understanding that God is love, and has eternally been love, is that for eternity the Father, Son and Spirit have lived in self-giving love for one another, and the Father's great act of love towards us is that he has made us children of God - we participate in the relationship of Love that the Son has with the Father. So we can also imply for this that the Father, Son and Spirit in their

² Tim Meadowcroft, The Message of the Word of God, IVP 2011, p.26

communion of love also communicate with each other. So we should see Genesis 1 not as God, as a single entity, speaking powerful words to make things come into existence, but as snippets of the conversation that is taking place as the three participate together to create a universe and creatures made in God's image to be the object of God's loving communication.

Genesis 1:2 tells us 'The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.' When it says 'And God said...' we should understand that to be the Father. And we're told in John 1 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.' The Son is so perfectly united with the Father's purpose, and so delighted to do anything the Father says, that as the Father speaks the Son acts, and it is as if the command of the Father and the Son who joyfully obeys the command are one and the same, and so the Son is called 'the Word'.

This makes creation an incredibly joyful, beautiful and personal thing. Creation is the overflow of the love of God: The Father who creates all things out of love for His Son, the Son who lovingly gives to the Father by being the means of creation, and the Spirit who hovers over all creation and causes it to take shape so that it brings glory to the Father. Every detail of creation - from the supernovae and comets, down to the finest flower, the smallest microbe and speck of dust is evidence of the God who speaks in self-giving love.

All this has **massive implications** for how we begin to understand the term, 'The Word of God'. Here are just a few:

1. We can never separate God from His word.

God's word is not like a file sitting on a server somewhere that we can download and listen to at whim without direct interaction with God Himself. We are used to interacting with words in a way that dissociates them from the speaker or writer; we read books written by dead people, and we listen to mp3 talks and songs spoken or sung by people on the other side of the world whom we will never meet, and who don't even know we exist. When God speaks, '... he alone turns his personal privacy into a deliberate disclosure of his reality.'³ When we hear Him speak we encounter not just words, but God Himself; His words are always accompanied by His personal presence. When we read the Bible we can not only be sure that God is speaking as we read, but that we are in a sense coming face to face with the Living God.

The theologian S. Lewis Jones said, 'In the 19th century, first Scripture died, then God died, then man died.' What he meant was that the authority of the Bible was undermined by liberal European 'Bible' scholars who saw human reason and science as the ultimate authority. This led to a cultural revolution in which the church was no longer the main influence in society, which led to Frederick Nietzsche's observation:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?⁴

³ Carl F.H. Henry

⁴ From 'The Gay Science' published in 1882, and fleshed out a couple of years later in the more popular work, 'Thus Spake Zarathustra'.

It was thought that this social revolution would bring great freedom and progress for the human race, but instead, as Dan Phillips says:

'It left man with no authoritative word about his origins, with no authoritative word about his meaning, with no authoritative word about his purpose, or even about the guidelines for life; and so what he hoped for was great joy and freedom, instead what he found was great despair, because he found that he had sawn off the very branch that he was sitting on...'⁵

We cannot reject what God says and think that we can somehow retain God apart from His word. If God were to stop speaking both this universe would cease to exist, and God would cease to be God.

God speaks in order to bring about relationship. Exodus 20:1-17 is an outline of the Ten Commandments, a summary of God's moral code given to ancient Israel. Before we read it as a list of rules to follow, we need to read the introduction in vss 1&2: 'And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'" When people say 'I keep the 10 commandments - by which they mean the last 6 of the 10 - it is meaningless unless they do so in the context of a relationship with God - ie. The first 4, and that they understand the God to whom they relate as the One who has redeemed them from slavery (ie. to sin and death).

In the course of receiving the Law, Moses was on Mt Sinai, and was talking with God about the need for His presence to go with them. He had just taken the Ten Commandments to the people, discovered them worshiping a golden calf, and had smashed the stone tablets on which the commandments were written. He had come back up the mountain to plead with God not to abandon them. After hearing God's promise of faithfulness and grace, he asked, 'Please show me your glory.' (Exodus 33:18). God instructed him to re-carve another set of stone tablets, and then did as Moses has asked: he revealed Himself and gave him a glimpse of His glory. What is remarkable about Moses' experience is that it wasn't what he **saw**, but what he **heard**. God 'proclaimed his name' (Exodus 34:5) - He made Himself known by words:

⁶ The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6-7)

If you want to know God, you need to be prepared to listen as He speaks, because He is **The God Who Speaks**.

How do you approach the Bible? Is it just another document, with interesting information and rules to follow? Do you actually expect to have an encounter with the Living God when you open it and read? Do you think that God is somehow absent when you don't have a warm fuzzy when reading?

2. We are made in the image of the God who speaks.

This means we too are created to be both speakers and listeners, and to express our relationships in words. Language is thought to be unique to human beings; while some animals have simple methods of communicating with each other, only human beings can have a conversation with each other about that fact. Only human beings among all species can use words to bring about both

⁵ Dan Phillips, sermon on June 17 at Copperfield Bible Church.

great good and great evil. The ultimate purpose for us having language is so that we may bring glory to God:

‘...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.’ (1 Peter 2:9)

All of our speaking is ultimately worthless if it doesn’t in some way contribute to bringing glory to God. Living in a right relationship with God (which we could describe as being in a place where we joyfully hear and obey His word) will result in words that express love towards God and towards others:

‘Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. ¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise..’ (Psalm 51:12-15)

In essence, we are made to be echoers of God, to be people who hear God speak and respond by speaking back to Him, and speaking forth His words to others so that they too may glorify God and thus fulfill their purpose as human beings. This is an incredible privilege, and an incredible responsibility!

How careful are you about the words you speak, and about when you speak and when you choose to remain silent? If your words are to be an echo of God’s words, what impression of God would people get from what you say and how you say it?

3. Our humanity is designed the way it is for an incredible purpose:

To be that which would clothe the Son of God, the Word who was with the Father in the beginning, and Who in eternity determined that He would take on flesh. Human beings, we are told by advocates of Intelligent Design, are perfectly designed to live and survive and flourish on this planet; we are the way we are because we have been placed in this environment. That is only scratching the surface. We are the way we are because the Father designed us to be united with Himself by His Son becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14). We speak to one another and to God because the Son would come and as a man would speak to us and to His Father, and his words would be the words of eternal life (John 6:68). So ultimately we will not speak anything to the Glory of God unless we speak as people united to Jesus.

Have you seriously considered the implications of Jesus Christ for not just what and how you speak, but your whole existence and reason for being? If God has designed you the way you are because of His eternal plan to send His Son to share your humanity, are you living in sync with that, or in opposition?

2. Another god, another word

Readings: Genesis 3:1-24, Psalm 42

Famine (Psalm 42)

Human beings are created to be in conversation with God. 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' (Deut. 8:3) If we take what we saw in talk one, we understand that to 'live on the Word of God' means to live in relationship with Him, knowing His living presence, knowing ourselves as creatures made in His image to respond to His word by speaking to Him and to others, and ultimately knowing that our full identity and destiny is bound up in the Word that was (to be) made flesh and dwell among us, clothed in our humanity.

However the context in which the Israelites came to know this reality is less than idyllic: 40 years of restless wandering in the desert, facing hunger and thirst and all the dangers and pains that come with being in a desert. Deuteronomy 8:3 begins, 'He humbled you and let you hunger...'. If God's word is food that gives true life, then this world seems to be facing a severe famine.

Psalm 42 - The Psalmist speaks of his great distress and grief, and the overwhelming weight of sorrow that is like being dumped by a great wave, unsure of which way is up and if he will ever find the surface again. This turmoil is caused by the continual speaking of his enemies (3,10) 'Where is your God?' In the midst of this turmoil is a quiet assurance (8): 'By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.' The Psalmist is caught between two words: that of God, and that of God's enemies. Whom will he listen to? Whom will he obey? This battle causes him to speak to himself (5,11) 'Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?'

Dialogue with the Devil (Genesis 3)

Eve chose to enter into dialogue with the serpent (the Devil - Rev. 20:2), in response to the question, 'Did God actually say...?' The serpent is a very clever apologist. First he casts doubt on Eve's understanding of the world, herself, and how she was to live, which was based on what God has said. (Incidentally, the command about which trees to eat from was given to Adam, before Eve was created. Adam had done what he was supposed to do: speak God's word to his wife.). God's command meant blessing, fruitfulness, freedom and abundance, along with great responsibility to spread the glory of God throughout all creation. The serpent's aim is make the command sound harsh and stingy; as if God is seeking to rob them of their freedom by keeping this fruit from them. Eve goes down this path, making the command sound harsher than it was, adding 'neither shall you touch it' (3). Second, he gives another word as an alternative, which is a direct contradiction of God's word 'You will not surely die' (4). His word brings her a new way of looking at the world; God is now the bad guy, a He is not only keeping the fruit from them, but the knowledge of good and evil. He is robbing them of their right to free speech; their right to determine their own truth, to trust in their own word instead of one that has been imposed on them by God.

Eve made a choice - one that Adam also made (as he was there with her, and like a standard bloke, shirked responsibility by not saying anything!), and one that that entire human race has made because we are all children of Adam and Eve: she believed the word of the serpent instead of the word of God. The great deception was that the serpent made her think she was working it all out herself, and that she was believing and trusting herself. Instead, she was simply trusting the serpent and his word. In and of ourselves we are nothing. We are created to live in reference to One who is outside ourselves; our life is found in listening to and obeying God. If we shut out the

voice of God we will automatically find another voice to fill the silence; we cannot truly exist without this communication coming from outside ourselves. 'Free thinking' is a load of crock: we will always be influenced and shaped by the words and ideas of others, because that is how we are designed. And so, Jesus said to some Jews who considered themselves to be God's people because they had cleverly worked out how to follow the Law:

⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God." (John 8:43-47)

Ultimately there are only two channels for us to tune into: the voice of God or the voice of the devil. Either the haranguing, nagging, 'Where is your God?' or the sweet, quiet assuring, 'Hope in God, for he is your salvation and your God.' (Ps 42:11)

How has God responded to our rejection of His voice?

1. The word of cursing.

Whereas originally God's word meant blessing and freedom and abundance, it now means cursing, slavery and hard work. How do you understand the idea of a 'curse'? We may imagine it like a spell; and incantation that brings about some dark spiritual power for destruction. Unfortunately our view of cursing can be more influenced by witchcraft than by the Bible. We need to see firstly that there is no curse that is effective apart from what God speaks. There are those in the Bible who attempt to curse God or His people and who, and those who speak words of cursing out of their spiteful or vengeful emotions, but the only curse that has any power of that of God, since curse is simply God's righteous reversal of the blessing given at Creation. You have absolutely no need to fear and 'generational' or 'family' curses that may have been spoken over you or your family; what we must fear is that we are under God's curse.

What does blessing mean? Numbers 6:22-27:

²² The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, ²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. ²⁷ "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them."

R.C. Sproul says:

'What is so important for us to understand the curse, is to understand first of all how the Jew understood blessing. 'May the Lord bless you' - what he meant by that is: to be blessed by God is to be bathed in the refulgent glory that emanates from His face. 'May the Lord bless you' means 'May the Lord make his face to shine upon you.' ... What the Jew longed for was 'O God, just let me once, just once, see your face.' You see, his ultimate hope is the same hope that is given to us in the New Testament, the final eschatological hope of the beatific vision: 'Behold what manner of love is this' John says, 'That we should be called the children of God.' ... And so the Jew asked for that benediction, 'O God, bless us to the degree that you would make your face to shine upon us.' Its polar opposite, its antithesis, again can be seen in vivid contrast to the benediction. It would be the supreme malediction that would read something like this: 'May the Lord curse you, and abandon you. May the Lord keep

you in darkness, and give you only judgement without grace. May the Lord turn his back upon you, and remove his peace from you... forever.⁶

Let's listen in to another conversation God has 'with Himself' as He looks at what human beings have become by listening to the word of the Devil:

5 The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6 And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7 So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." (Genesis 6:5-7)

This conversation then flows out into a conversation/command with Noah:

¹³ And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth. ¹⁴ Make yourself an ark of gopher wood.... (Genesis 6:13-14)

Our rebellion has brought upon us the rightful judgement of God's curse. Just as He is present in His fulness as He speaks blessing, so He is present in all His terrifying holiness when He speaks the word of judgement. Yet we need to remember one important thing: God only speaks a curse upon those whom He has designed for relationship. The curse is only possible because there was a blessing to remove. If His plan was simply to curse humanity and do away with us once and for all, then why would He tell anyone about it? Why would He disclose to Noah His decision - allow Noah to listen in on His 'internal conversation'? By itself, this fact alone is enough to see that God is a God of grace, mercy and patience. It gives us a hint that God's purposes towards humanity in bringing the curse is ultimately for good.

2. The Law.

We have seen that God established relationships by speaking. When He rescued Israel from Egyptian slavery, He brought them to Mt Sinai and declared to them that they were His people, He was their God, and that He was entering into a covenant relationship with them. This covenant took the form of the Law, given through Moses. Ten 'Words' formed the essential backbone of the Law, which was expanded into over 600 commands found throughout the 'Torah' - the first five books of the Old Testament, and which gave the Nation of Israel its civic and religious legislation. The Israelites were told that their identity as a people, that which distinguished them from among all the nations around them was that they were a people in conversation with their God:

⁵ See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶ Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' ⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸ And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today? (Deuteronomy 4:5-8)

God's people hear Him speak to them in His Law, and they in turn call upon Him and know His nearness to Him in doing so. We need to see that the Law is God's action of grace. Law is not opposed to grace. God was under no obligation to choose a people out of the mass of rebellious humanity and disclose Himself to them by giving His Law. By giving the Law to Israel, He gave Himself. The Law perfectly displays His character. Alec Motyer writes:

⁶ R.C. Sproul, "The Curse Motif of the Atonement", talk at *Together for the Gospel 2008*

'...every precept of the law is a reflection of 'what I am.' Man is the living, personal image of God; the law is the written preceptual image of God. The intention of Lev. 19 is declared at the outset: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy' (vs. 2). The Lord longs for his people to live in his image, and to that end he has given them his law.'⁷

And Geoffrey Bingham:

Unfortunately, the very word 'law' is linked in most people's minds with the Latin *lex*, and so of legislation and legal ideas. The Hebrew word *torah* has a much different connotation, which is better even than the Greek word *nomos*. It really means instruction. Law, in the first case, is linked with creation, but has no contractual idea. It is the way God is in action and, hence, the way by which creation functions.

But not only that, in this covenant God binds Himself to Israel. They are **His** people and He is **their** God. God's dwelling place is not only the highest Heavens, but also in a tent that travelled with them in their wilderness wanderings, and eventually in the Temple in Jerusalem. And while all the other nations had in their temples statues and images of their conception of what their gods were like, the Tabernacle/Temple contained a box, in which was kept the two stone tablets on which was written the Ten Words: God's communication to His people. When the Romans ransacked Jerusalem and raided the Temple, intending to possess the image of the Jewish god and place it among their collection of all the gods of the nations they had conquered, they found a sanctuary that seemed 'empty', with no divine image. They concluded that the Jews had no God, and so called them 'Atheists'. Jews were considered bizarre because of their prohibition against religious imagery in the second commandment (also the longest out of the 10),

⁴ "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:4-6)

God is passionate about His people knowing Him *through His word*, not through ritual or symbolism. I think this is because if my god is contained or represented in an image or statue, then I can feel like I own and control my god; my god is manageable and subject to me. However if my God is known by the words He speaks to me, then that means I am owned by Him; my life is directed and shaped by His commands, and I can ultimately not fit Him into the box of my own conception.

God's intention was never that the giving of the Law would be the final solution to the problem of humanity's rebelliousness. It seemed that God's voice was continually being drowned out by the myriad other voices that bombarded Israel from every side. This was not the fault of God, but of the people. When we walk down a busy street or sit in a noisy room at a party, there are many sounds that can seem like a mish-mash of noise. However if we are next to someone with whom we are having an engaging conversation, we are able to focus in on their voice and tune out all the other sound, even if technically we can still hear it. What makes the difference is our intention. The problem with the Israelites was that they did not want to hear God's Word, because they did not want to obey. They 'tuned out' and began listening to the background noise instead - noise that offered them all the same things that the Serpent had offered Even in the garden.

⁷ . A. Motyer, 'Biblical Concept of Law', in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. A. Elwell, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1990, p. 624.

God gave Israel His perfect Law at Sinai, but the law did nothing to change the hearts of the people. It essentially did three things:

- a. **The Law provided an external framework for the Israelites to follow by as they lived as God's people among the nations.** As we saw earlier, the Israelites' relationship with God through the Law was a testimony to the unique work that God was doing in and through them in fulfilling His promises to Abraham. A number of laws in Leviticus may seem strange to us - such as clean and unclean foods (Lev. 11), commands against tattoos (Lev. 19:28), goatees (Lev 21:5) and having milk with goat meat (Ex 34:26). All of these laws were about Israel being distinct from all the other nations, and shunning those nations' practices in order to remain distinct. *When you hear and obey the Word of God, you will stand out from the world that has shut out His voice.*
- b. **The Law kept them dependant upon God and His mercy.** The sacrificial system that operated on a daily basis in the Temple was a constant reminder to the Israelites that if it were not for God's mercy and grace they would not even exist, let alone be a nation chosen by God. Animal sacrifice was an audio-visual display of both the wrath that sinners deserve from God, and the mercy He shows in allowing an animal to be slaughtered in the place of the wrath-deserving sinner. It was macabre, bloody, primitive, crass and obscene; because sin is macabre, bloody, primitive, crass and obscene. The primary function of the written Law was to reveal the horror of sin, and our desperate need of forgiveness and reconciliation.

⁸ Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, ⁹ understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine' (1 Timothy 1:8-10)

'Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.' (Romans 3:19-20)

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." (Galatians 3:10)

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions... and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary... if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin... We were held captive under the law, imprisoned... (Galatians 3:19, 21-23)

Something like a doctor who has diagnosed in us a serious, deadly yet curable disease, God speaks to us bluntly of our deadly malaise of sin, and the judgement it deserves. If this has never been your experience from reading God's Word, then it is doubtful that you have really understood sin and your need for a saviour. This was not out of a malicious, ruthless desire to crush us, but in order to bring healing - which brings us to the third and most important function of the Law:

- c. **By its own insufficiency, Law pointed them towards the all sufficient solution: Jesus.** I gave only a partial quotation of the passage in Galatians:

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." ¹² But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who

does them shall live by them.”¹³ **Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law** by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” –¹⁴ **so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles**, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:10-14)

¹⁹ Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, **until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made**, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.²⁰ Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.²¹ Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, **so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given** to those who believe.²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian **until Christ came**, in order that we might be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:19-24)

God’s word came to His people at Mt Sinai, in the words of the Law, through the mouths of the priests and teachers of the Law; yet ultimately the Word of God was coming to them down the passage of history from the central point of history when the Eternal Word would walk in flesh and bones along the roads of Palestine, all the way to Jerusalem and the cross. If the timeline of history were to be imagined as a landscape, with the far East as the point of creation, and the far West as the point of consummation, then God’s word sounds out as if from a radio transmitter on a tall steeple at this central point, echoing right back into the past and all the way forward into the future. Someone off in the East who had a radio receiver would be able to tune in, hear the message of redemption, have their eyes drawn towards the source of the message, and respond to the call to come to this source. These radio receivers are like the third response of God to our rejection of His voice: the prophets.

3. The Prophets.

The first prophet mentioned in the Scriptures was Abel (Genesis 4:1-4,) the son of Adam and Eve who was murdered by his brother Cain. Jesus implies in Luke 11:49-51 that there was a continuous stream of people from Abel right up to the last Old Testament prophet Zechariah who were God’s mouthpiece to speak His word to the people of the earth:

⁴⁹ Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’⁵⁰ so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation,⁵¹ from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation. (Luke 11:49-51)

Abel set the precedent in two ways: his sacrifice of a lamb pointed to the need for atonement, and the response of his brother who became angry and murdered him characterised the general response that people would have to the Word of God throughout the generations to follow. Most if not of the prophets did not die of old age, but were killed by those who were enraged by what they said, and by their declaration ‘Thus says the Lord’ (414 times), ‘Hear the Word of the Lord’ (34 times) ‘The Lord says’ (6 times) ‘The Lord has spoken/said’ (35 times)⁸. There are over 123 prophets recorded in the Old Testament, as well as others who are mentioned in passing. If we were to stick with the landscape analogy, you could hardly walk through this landscape without tripping over a receiver. God’s people could go nowhere without hearing God’s voice being declared, and this voice echoed out even to places like Nineveh (Jonah), Sheba (probably Ethiopia).

⁸ All up, phrases spoken by prophets that talk of God speaking through them number close to 600.

The prophets essentially did three things - which correspond to the three purposes of the Law:

1. They called the people back to the Law and to live as God had called them to live according to His commands.
2. They exposed the disobedience and idolatry of the people, warning them of the curses that were promised when the Law was given, and declaring God's Judgement.
3. They pointed the people forward to the glorious hope that God had given them in the promises of a Messiah, the King who would bring justice and truth to the nations, and who would give people a heart transplant so that they would willingly and joyfully seek the Lord and hear and obey His voice.

³¹ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

3. The Word Who is God

Reading: John 1:9-1

In about 850BC, Israel had been split into two kingdoms for nearly 100 years. The current king of the Northern kingdom Judah was Ahab, who was considered one of the worst kings in their history. At this time God raised up the prophet Elijah, who spoke out against the king's idolatry, and whose ministry climaxed in the famous confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel. After the defeat of the prophets of Baal as the Lord sent fire from heaven and proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that He was the One true God, things didn't quite work out as he had hoped. All of the false prophets had been executed (as was required under the Law), and Queen Jezebel, the pagan wife of King Ahab, sent a message to Elijah: 'So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.' (1 Kings 19:2).

Elijah fled to escape Jezebel, and after a 40 day journey he arrived at Mt Horeb, about 460km away. This may sound like trivial information to us, until we realise that Mt. Horeb was another name for Mt Sinai. This was the same place that Moses was with the Israelites when God entered into covenant relationship with them by speaking His Law. And Elijah's experience parallels that of Moses. Moses' being 'hid in the cleft of a rock' is echoed as Elijah set up camp in a cave. And surprise, surprise, the Word of the Lord came to him: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'. Elijah's complaint is not dissimilar to Moses': the people had abandoned God and His covenant, and turned to other Gods. Elijah was expecting a spectacular revival of true religion in Israel; to see God's mighty hand at work in response to the defeat of the false prophets. Instead, he was running for his life and as far as he knew, he was the only one left in Israel who worshipped truly. And then, like Moses, Elijah has an experience of the Lord as the Lord passed by. There was a great wind, an earthquake, and a fire, but the Lord was not in any of them. Then he heard the sound of a 'low whisper, ' a 'still, small voice'. He went to the entrance of the cave and heard the Lord speak again, 'Why are you here, Elijah?'

850 years later, the same still, small voice spoke again in a lounge room in the town of Bethlehem. Oblivious to most of the world, the Eternal Son, the Word who was God and was with God and by whom and through whom the universe was created, was born as a frail, helpless, trembling, blood covered baby, and placed in an animal food trough. He needed his umbilical cord cut, and would have died of hypothermia if his mother hadn't wrapped him in a cloth. Those to whom God announced this universe transforming event were a bunch of rag-tag shepherds out in the hills, and a group of pagan astrologers. From the moment of his birth he was faced with hostility, as King Herod slaughtered all the young boys in the region in an attempt to kill him; and he lived for some time as a refugee in Egypt. And everyone except his family and neighbours forgot about him for the next 28 or so years as he lived privately in a backwater village called Nazareth in Galilee.

'Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his glory - the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father.' (John 1:14, NET)

I said in session one, 'If you want to know God, you need to be prepared to listen as He speaks, because He is the God Who Speaks.' God reveals His glory - Himself - by proclaiming His Name. We may ask, 'So where and how can I hear God's voice? How can I be sure it is Him speaking amidst all the other words and gods that are competing for my loyalty? And how can I be a person who truly hears and obeys the Word of God?' The answer is Jesus. There is no clearer communication from God, about God, *of God*, than what we have in Jesus Christ. If you have seen Him, you have seen the Father.

John wants us to think of Genesis 1 when we read his opening words to his gospel. It's been suggested by some that he deliberately uses the word '*logos*' because he was writing for Greeks and Greek-influenced Jews. In Greek philosophy, especially Plato, the *logos* was the spiritual (but impersonal) principle of reason and creative order. If this was in John's mind, then it would seem as if John were saying, 'This creative principle, this ultimate spiritual reality that you Philosophers have discovered and discussed for so long, this *logos* is Jesus, the one and only Son of God, who has walked in our flesh and bone.' But, I don't think that connecting with philosophers was what was uppermost in his mind. He would have lost them at, 'The *logos* became flesh...', as Greek thinkers considered this material world to be inferior, debased, even evil, and the spiritual to be the only pure, good reality. Besides, John was an uneducated fisherman. It is very unlikely that he was schooled in Greek philosophy.

John was thinking of His God, Yahweh, the Lord, who has been speaking down through the ages in a personal, intimate, relational way. And he uses the word *logos* because that's a word he was familiar with, as it was one of the two words used to translate the Hebrew 'dabar' in the Greek Old Testament. He would be remembering Jesus' words, which he quotes just a few chapters later:

³⁷ ...the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, ³⁸ and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. ³⁹ You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. (John 5:37-40)

Jesus is echoing the sentiment of the Old Testament prophets, who brought God's message to the people, but the people did not listen. In effect, they were not just rejecting a message or a set of words, but the subject of those words: Jesus.

Many people want to treat Jesus as a great teacher or prophet, along the lines of Mohammed, Confucius, Buddha or Dr Phil. They will often refer to things like the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Sermon on the Mount (even if they have never read it for themselves) and the ethical teaching there in order to back up their case. In doing so, they (and maybe we) completely misunderstand the place of this sermon in Jesus' teaching and the Gospels.

The Sermon on the Mount is not the core of Jesus' message and mission. It's more like an introduction. Jesus sees the people, and has compassion on them because they are like sheep without a shepherd. This is because the Pharisees and teachers of the Law had laid heavy burdens on them by the way they taught the Law. The Pharisees were legalists, and the thing that characterises a legalist is that they see righteousness by the law as achievable. A legalist, contrary to what might seem logical, actually lowers the standard of the law to suit their ability to reach it. Their sense of smug self justification at keeping the letter of the law enables them to ignore or excuse their actual failure to keep the spirit of the Law. This is what Jesus was so scathing about in his criticisms, for example:

²³ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! ²⁵ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. ²⁷ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matthew 23:23-28)

In this sermon, recorded at the start of Matthew and Luke, and probably delivered numerous times, Jesus teaches the Law truly, as it was meant to be understood. He teaches the spirit of the law - but in doing so shows that that standard the Law demands is much, much higher than the Pharisees had made it by just teaching the letter. It meant that someone who hates another person is just as guilty as the one who kills (Matthew 5:21-22); the man who lusts after a woman in his heart is just as guilty as if he had physical sex with her. (Matthew 5:27-28) It meant that sin was so serious that it cannot be covered up by a pious, self righteous keeping of the law, but called for a rigorous, harsh self examination that would require such extreme measures as chopping off your hand or gouging out your eye in order to escape from hell. (Matthew 5:29-30). He says, 'You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' (Matthew 5:48) Jesus is restoring the Law to it's primary purpose: to expose the sinful hearts of men and women, and to release them from the burden of righteousness by law-keeping by driving them to mercy as their only option.

The heart of Jesus' message is not ethical teaching; the heart of His message is Himself: that the Kingdom of God has arrived, and that He is God's appointed King. This is the direction that all of his teaching and parables and miracles pointed. He is both the Messenger and the Message. The people said 'This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world' (John 6:14), but failed to see that he was also the One of whom all the prophets spoke.

I am the way to God: I did not come
To light a path, to blaze a trail, that you
May simply follow in my tracks, pursue
My shadow like a prize that's cheaply won.
My life reveals the life of God, the sum
Of all he is and does. So how can you,
The sons of night, look on me and construe
My way as just the road for you to run?
My path takes in Gethsemane, the Cross,
And stark rejection draped in agony.
My way to God embraces utmost loss:
Your way to god is not my way, but me.
Each other path is dismal swamp, or fraud.
I stand alone: I am the way to God.

I am the truth of God: I do not claim
I merely speak the truth, as though I were
A prophet (but no more), a channel, stirred
By Spirit power, or purely human frame.
Nor do I say that when I take his name
Upon my lips, my teaching cannot err
(Though this is true). A mere interpreter
I'm not, some prophet-voice of special fame.

In timeless reaches of eternity
The Triune God decided that the Word,
The self-expression of the Deity,
Would put on flesh and blood - and thus be heard.
The claim to speak the truth good men applaud.
I claim much more: I am the truth of God.

I am the resurrection life. It's not
As though I merely bear the life-giving drink,
A magic elixir which (men might think)
Is cheap because though lavish it's not bought.
The price of life was fully paid: I fought
With death and black despair; for I'm the drink
Of life. The resurrection morn's the link
Between my death and endless life long sought.
I am the firstborn from the dead; and by
My triumph, I deal death to lusts and hates.
My life I now extend to men, and ply
Them with the draught that ever satiates.
Religion's page with empty boasts is rife:
But I'm the resurrection and the life.
(D.A. Carson)⁹

⁹ D.A. Carson, The Gospel According to John, p. 492-493

If we want to know God, we need not only to listen to Jesus's words. We need to listen to Jesus the person and the ultimate Word of God. We should not expect God to speak in any way or any place apart from Him, and anything we hear that claims to be the Word of God that does not point us to Jesus as the centre of the universe, the centre of history, and the centre of the heart of the Father is a forgery and a scam.

There were three word-responses God had made to our rebellious rejection of His word: The *Curse*, the *Law* and the *Prophets*.

We have seen that Jesus comes in fulfilment of the second two of the three: the Law and the Prophets. He not only perfectly taught the Law, but he perfectly kept the Law, in that he loved the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, and he loved His neighbour as himself. And he not only spoke as The Prophet, but embodied the Word in his very personhood.

But what of the first of God's word-responses: the *curse*?

When Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount, He begins with the pronouncement of blessing (beatitude) upon those who are part of God's kingdom. Later in Matthew 23, as he is heading to Jerusalem for the final showdown with the religious authorities, he presents a list of woes (some of which we read a moment ago): 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!' We need to see the weight of the phrase 'Woe to you.' He is effectively saying, 'May the Lord curse you and abandon you...!'

Luke 19 tells us that as he approached Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, with the crowd celebrating, waving palm branches and calling out 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!', the whole event ended in tears - Jesus' tears - as he looked on the city and said,

⁴² "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side ⁴⁴ and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation." (Luke 19:42-44)

Jesus' whole ministry is sandwiched between these blessings and curses. There is an incredible depth of symbolism in this.

Jesus' teaching mirrors what took place as the Israelites took the first steps to enter the promised land. Joshua, according to Moses' instructions, had representatives of the twelve tribes, six each, to stand on two mountains, Mt Gerazim and Mt Ebal. (Joshua 8). These two peaks stand either side of the mountain pass they took into the promised land. Those on Mt Gerazim declared a blessing on the people if they obeyed the law, and those on Mt Ebal declared a curse for those who disobeyed. As the curses and blessing were declared, the Ark of the Covenant - the sign of God's relationship with His people, containing the stone tablets Moses used to carve the Ten Commandments on, was between them in the valley.

Jesus now stands in the midst of the people of Israel. He is 'the Prophet who is to come' - as promised to Moses, and of whom Joshua was merely a shadow (they even have the same name, as the Hebrew for Jesus is Joshua). He is the Word of God, who in his whole being fulfils completely the Law that was summed up on the stone tablets. He is the presence of God among His people, of which the Ark was symbolic. And in being fully man and fully God he stands as the guarantee that God's relationship with humanity is intimate, personal, and indissoluble. As the Word made flesh, he speaks forth the blessings and curses, indicating that in His arrival God's

people may now enter into the true promised land of eternal life, of which the geographical location was simply symbolic. In Him they may find the true rest of God from the burden of sin and legalism. He alone is the living water and the bread from heaven that quenches the thirst and satisfies the hunger of all who hunger and thirst for righteousness of which the manna and the water from the rock were pictures.

Jesus began his ministry with the pronouncement of blessing to all who receive Him as God's promised Messiah King, yet he concludes with a pronouncement of cursing and woe upon a people who have rejected Him. The message is clear: The people deserve judgement and cursing, because when God had come to them unmistakably in Jesus, they had turned their backs and blocked their ears and refused to come to Him and receive life.

In light of this, Jesus' course of action is completely unexpected - and shocking. Given His pronouncements, and His identity as God's Messiah King, what he technically should have done was to bring down the fire of God's judgement upon Jerusalem. He should have ensured that all the outworking of the curse took place throughout every place where he was rejected:

¹⁶ Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. ¹⁷ Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. ¹⁸ Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. ¹⁹ Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. (Deuteronomy 28:17-19)

Yet that is not what he does. Instead, he allows himself to be betrayed and arrested. He faces false accusations, mocking, and the cursing of those who a few days earlier had called him blessed. He does not speak one word in his own defence, except to make it clear that He is the Messiah, the King of the Jews, and that he came to testify to the truth. He comes as the Blessed One to the cursed covenant breakers, and instead of bringing upon them the judgement they deserve, this judgement comes upon him.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, "cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree". (Galatians 3:13)

Notice that this verse says much more than simply 'he became cursed'. Rather, it says that he *became a curse*. Not only does he bear the weight and guilt of all of our sin, and in doing so all of the shame and grief and despair that comes with it, but he is, *in himself*, God's final word of cursing upon all evil, injustice rebellion and pride. He is at that moment both the most foul, despised and abhorrent creature in the entire universe, and *God's comprehensive, all inclusive verdict upon us foul, despicable and abhorrent creatures*. At the cross the Father turns the radiance of his face and his favour away from His own beloved Son, who in response cries out, 'My God my God why have you abandoned me!', yet at the same time it pleased the Father to crush His own Son, and He looked with favour upon this bloody sacrifice because the Son was laying down His life in obedience to His Father's will. Jesus bore the word of cursing that was upon us, and because of his humble obedience the word of blessing may now flow to all who listen and believe.

²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. ²⁵ "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸ Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. (John 5:24-29)

What is true faith? It is to hear the word of Jesus, and by hearing this word, believing in the Father who sent Him. Have you heard the voice of the Son of God? His voice is the same voice of the Father, the same voice that commanded the light to shine out of darkness. His voice has power to bring the dead to life, to save from judgement, to remove the curse and restore the full blessing of the fullness of the presence of God. His voice is so powerful that it unblocks ears, opens blind eyes, and transforms stony hearts to beat with love for God. It takes rejected orphans, and calls them into the Father's family, and causes them to cry not 'God, why have you abandoned me?', but 'Abba, Father!'.

Your salvation does not ultimately hang on your listening skills, but on His speaking skills. How well can a dead person listen? It has been said (tongue in cheek) that when Jesus came to the tomb of his friend Lazarus, who had been dead for more than 4 days, and called into the open tomb, 'Lazarus, come out.' (John 11:43), it was a good thing that he mentioned his name, otherwise all of the dead would have risen, such is the power of His word! If you have even a mustard seed of faith, it is because the Son of God has spoken to you of the gospel news of his sacrificial death and His victorious resurrection and in doing so He has brought you to life and enabled you to believe.

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:10-12)

4. Of God, the Word

Reading: Hebrews 3:1 - 4:13

We come now to some (not every) practical implications of all that we have seen so far of the Word of God. Some key summarising points:

1. God is the God who speaks. This is who He is, as the Triune God; the Father Son and Spirit who are and always have been in loving communication with each other.
2. God's Word and His presence are one and the same. To hear God speak is to be drawn to know Him personally and intimately.
3. We are made in the image of the God, and so are created to both listen to Him, to speak back to him in loving worship, and to speak to one another in love.
4. However in our rebellion we have shut out the Word of God, and instead listen to the word of Satan. The result of this is death.
5. God's initial response to this rebellion is not to give us the 'silent treatment.' Instead, He has spoken His Law, which both revealed the fact that we are under God's curse and judgement, and pointed forward to the day when God would speak His final, conclusive word that would resolve all evil and bring salvation
6. This final, conclusive Word of God is Jesus Christ. He perfectly revealed the Father by speaking all that the Father had given Him, He fulfilled the Law, and became a curse to redeem us from the curse of the law.
7. The Word of Jesus, the Word of God, now has power to raise the dead in sin, release from judgement, and create saving faith in rebellious sinners.

What does this mean for us as God's people in today's world?

1. We need the right basis for our confidence in the Scriptures

Our trust in the Bible as being inspired reliable, authoritative and inerrant must come from our confidence in the One to whom they testify. While historical and archaeological evidences have some merit, all they can prove is that the Bible we have today is true to the originals as they were written. We could apply the same tests to other ancient documents; that does not prove them to be inspired by God. I once heard my completely pagan uncle, after seeing one of those tabloid-press-style documentaries on revealing the mysteries of the Bible, say, 'The Bible is 100% true, every word of it!' Yet as far as I know he never read the Bible, nor was it reflected in any way in his life. In a sense, the Bible as a book on the shelf was completely useless to him because he did not know the One Who is both its author and its subject.

Paul says, 'I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.' (2 Timothy 1:12). His confidence was in the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ who has saved him from sin and death and called him to proclaim the Gospel to the nations. This confidence flowed into his next statement, 'Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.' (1:13). Little did Paul know that this patten of sound words (ie. 1 Timothy and what is to follow in 2 Timothy) would, soon after his death, be included in the canon of Scripture, and would become a pattern of sound words not just for Timothy but for all believers down through the last two millenia. He could call the pattern of words 'sound' because the One who spoke them is sound.

What do we mean when we say 'The Bible is the Word of God'? One thing we need to be careful of is meaning, 'The Word of God is the Bible.' The problem with this phrase is that it restricts the

Word of God to the book. It is not the physical book that is the Word of God, but it is the words contained in the book, that are designed to be read and spoken. If the book remains on the shelf and is never read, we cannot say it is the Word of God. It is simply a pile of paper covered in ink squiggles. Otherwise we can end up with a superstitious view of the Bible that leads to doing things like sleeping with it under our pillow or as one woman was reported to have done, insert a page in each of her sandwiches so she could feed on God's word daily, or use it for our own political ends:

Video: *The Book of Eli - 'It's not a \$%#@ book, it's a weapon'*¹⁰

We need to understand that there are **four Biblical ways of understanding the phrase, 'The Word of God'**

- a. **God speaking.** This is the ultimate meaning - not the words that God speaks, but the action of God speaking. (ie not the 'what' but the 'how')
- b. **The Son of God incarnate.** 'The name by which He is called is The Word of God' (Revelation 9:13). He sums up and completes God's revelation to us.
- c. **The Scriptures.** 'Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' and these words were written down (2 Peter 1:20-21). We only have the Scriptures because God speaks and has spoken in His Son.
- d. **The proclaimed Gospel.** By implication, a Gospel must be spoken, declared, proclaimed. Acts 12:24 says, 'But the Word of God increased and multiplied.' referring to the proclamation of the Gospel by the Apostles and the increasing numbers of those who believed and in turn began proclaiming.

So we see that the Scriptures (ie. The Bible) are authoritative and infallible because they are an integral part of the authoritative, infallible 'chain of events' that is the Word of God. This chain starts with God the Speaker, comes livingly to us in Christ, is recorded, testified to preserved and passed down to us in the Bible, and is continued as we go into the world and proclaim Jesus. If we reduce the Word of God to just the physical Bible, then the book becomes lifeless and dry, a set of information, of which reading and studying is a purely intellectual exercise and from which God can seem distant. While it's claimed that Christian Theology is the most written about theme than any other in the history of the world, it is probably also true that there's a fair swag of it that isn't worth reading, because people approached the Bible as a piece of literature to be examined, dissected and criticised, rather than the living active Word of God.

2. In evangelism, we need to proclaim the Word of God, not the Bible.

Most evangelical ministries (like ES) and churches start their statement of belief with a statement about the Bible:

(We believe in) The divine inspiration and infallibility of Holy Scripture as originally given and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. (AFES doctrinal statement)

This comes partly from our heritage. In the Reformation the reformers fought for the sole authority of the Scriptures, against the Catholic church's teaching that the Church and Reason are sources

¹⁰ Carnegie: To his men "Put a crew together, we're going after 'em."

Redridge: For a \$%#@' book?

Carnegie: IT'S NOT A \$%#@' BOOK! IT'S A WEAPON. A weapon aimed right at the hearts and minds of the weak and the desperate. It will give us control of them. If we want to rule more than one small, \$%#@ town, we have to have it. People will come from all over, they'll do exactly what I tell 'em if the words are from the book. It's happened before and it'll happen again. All we need is that book.'

of authority equal to the Scriptures. We also today face the challenges of liberal theology and secular humanism that seek to discredit the Bible. So, it is normally a good starting point, because it can be the point so often challenged.

And so we may say to someone who asks, 'What does 'Evangelical' mean?' something like 'We are Christians who believe the Bible is true.' A problem with that approach, is that we are starting straight away on a defensive note. We are assuming people believe the Bible to be false or unreliable. They may well believe that, but then they may not have made any assumptions.

The Gospel Coalition, an alliance of Evangelical churches and ministries, begins its confessional statement at a different point:

The Tri-une God. We believe in one God, eternally existing on three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who know, love and glorify one another. This one true and living God is infinitely perfect both in his love and in his holiness. He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible, and is therefore worthy to receive all glory and adoration...¹¹

They then move on in point two to talk about 'Revelation':

God has graciously disclosed his existence and power in the created order, and has supremely revealed himself to fallen human beings in the person of his Son, the incarnate Word. Moreover, this God is a speaking God who by his Spirit has graciously disclosed himself in human words: we believe that God has inspired the words preserved in the Scriptures...

What/Who is your final authority?

We can also give the impression that our ultimate authority is the Bible. But it's not. Jesus is our King, and it is to him that every knee will bow. He does not receive His authority from the Bible, but from the Father; the Bible receives its authority from *Him*. The words of the Bible is the means by which people are drawn to the cross of Jesus and the throne of God, so if our focus is on proving the Bible to be true, we have focused on the means, not the end.

If we are wanting our conversation with this enquirer to be a Gospel opportunity, we need to avoid jumping straight into the distraction of a debate about the reliability of the Bible. They will not be saved by coming to believe in the doctrine of Scriptural Authority, but by believing the One who sent Jesus. Charles Spurgeon is reported to have said, '*The Bible is like a lion. Who ever heard of defending a lion? Just turn it loose; it will defend itself*'. This gives us incredible freedom. It means we can speak forth the Word of God from the Scriptures with a confidence that God is speaking to the hearer as we are doing so, and with a confidence that His word will accomplish what he sends it to do. The Holy Spirit will open their ears and eyes to the 'ring of truth' as it comes to them, and will result either in their hearts being softened to believe, or hardened to reject the Word.

The best way to give someone a sense of the Bible's reliability is to speak it. Regardless of their view or conclusion about the Bible, they still need to hear that,

³⁰ God... commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

This is because they need to come face to face not with the authority of the Bible, but the authority of God, who requires the obedience of faith in the Gospel.

3. We must not underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit

¹¹ Gospel Coalition Foundation Documents, p.2

You may have come to this conference hoping for some kind of experience - a warm fuzzy, or a tangible, physical manifestation. In God's sovereignty He is able to do this, and in His kindness I believe He still does from time to time.

I once had a conversation with a Christian worker with another campus-based ministry. She asked what Church I went to, and whether it was a 'Spirit filled' church. I knew what she meant, and I also knew that according to her definition my church would not have been considered 'Spirit filled'. However my answer was *'Yes it is. We have the Word of God proclaimed every Sunday.'* I'm not sure if she took in my answer, as she seemed more keen to talk about the specky things that happen at her church.

In 1 Corinthians 12-14 Paul talks about how the Holy Spirit was manifesting Himself at the church in Corinth (and how he wasn't). The Corinthians were enamoured by the idea of '*pneumatikon*' - a word most often translated in English translations as 'spiritual gifts'. A better translation would be simply 'spirituals'.

¹ Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. ² You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. ³ Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit. ⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

They considered people to be on a higher level of spirituality if they were able to perform certain things like healing, speaking in tongues, etc. Paul immediately debunks the idea of a person being more 'spiritual' than another by saying that these things, if they are genuine, happen not because of our spirituality, but because the Holy Spirit is at work among you, and His presence is manifested in various ways:

⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

It is important to note that, apart from healing and miracles, all the gifts involve speaking and/or listening to the Word of God. You might even argue that normally miracles we see in the New Testament also rarely happen without someone 'speaking forth'. Jesus himself was never silent when he did his miracles. This shows us something really important. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is chiefly about the communication of the Word of God. Jesus told His disciples:

¹² "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:12-15)

The Spirit does two things here: He makes us **able** to listen and receive the 'many things' that Jesus has to say to us, and He **says** them to us. The Word of the Father, given and embodied in Jesus, now comes to use in the power of the Spirit. (The 'things that are to come' are not revelations about the future end time scenario, but simply the Word of Christ that was to come to the disciples in the day of Pentecost and beyond.) So we cannot hear or believe without the

powerful speaking of the Holy Spirit, and if we are looking for the Holy Spirit to work, we should expect that it will be primarily in the form of or accompanied by the Word of Christ being proclaimed.

Some Christians (and possibly you or your church) believe that the New Testament gifts have ceased with the completion of the New Testament canon and the death of the Apostles. That is not my personal view, but I can appreciate that those who hold this view do so because of thorough Bible reading. If you or your church believe that these gifts continue into the present, and are practiced in your meetings or services, there is a very simple test to assess whether what is said or done are true manifestations of the Holy Spirit:

1. Does it point to, magnify, honour and declare the worth of Jesus Christ in his life, death and resurrection? (Because He is the Word of God)
2. Does it line up with the Scriptures? (Because God does not contradict Himself)
3. Does it build up the church and/or effectively declare the Gospel to non-believers? (Because God speaks always with the goal of His glory and the salvation of sinners in mind)

When the Spirit is at work there will not be a hint of doubtfulness, of the ego of the person speaking, or of worldly ideals. The Scripture will not be taken out of context or made to say something it is not saying. There will not be anything added to the Scriptures that is claimed to be 'new' or only revealed for this generation and not those past. The person speaking should have the humility to not suggest or imply that if you disobey them you are disobeying God, or to suggest that they have been appointed by God in a unique way or have access to spiritual mysteries that the 'average Christian' doesn't. If any of this happens, be very wary.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians who lived in a culture that was influenced by a gnostic, pagan religious atmosphere in which only 'special' or 'holy' or 'initiated' people could understand and impart divine mysteries, makes it clear that because the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all of God's people, not just the 'elite', then even the 'average' Christian has full insight and access into the mysteries of God:

⁹ But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"—¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. ¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶ "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:9-16)

Verse 9 is often misquoted as referring to our not knowing what heaven will be like. In fact it is saying that God has done a remarkable thing in the Gospel, as it comes to us in the power of the Holy Spirit: He has revealed things that no eye can see, no ear can hear, and no mind could imagine: **the depths of God!** (10). If we had any ability in and of ourselves to understand the mind of the Lord (16), then we would be able to consider ourselves cleverer than God, and so able to instruct Him. The remarkable (again) thing is that we **do** have the mind of the Lord because we have the mind of Christ, but it is purely because it has been given.

It is a good thing for a Christian to be praying daily and continuously for the filling of the Holy Spirit, because as we are filled by the Spirit we have our eyes open to see more of the glory of Christ as we hear Him proclaimed in the words of the Scriptures and through faithful people who expound the Scriptures. Pray for the filling of the Spirit whenever you go to church or Bible Talk or any other place or time that you are reading or hearing the Word. If you want to know whether the sermon or talk was a Spirit filled, Spirit empowered word from the Lord, here is a guide:

¹ And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

Paul told the Corinthians, 'Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.' (14:1). The good news is that you may all prophesy, and in fact you do so every time you speak the Word of Christ in love. As the angel told John in Revelation, 'The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.' And in this way God's promise through Joel, declared on the day of Pentecost is fulfilled:

'... ¹⁷ in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸ even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

4. We need to be people who have ears to hear.

Several times as Jesus taught, he said, 'If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.' Just because God full, final and al powerful Word has been spoken to us in Jesus Christ, does not mean all the other voices have stopped their competition to be heard, believed and trusted.

Sometimes when driving in the car with my three children, I reflect on how peaceful it is in the car, unlike the early years when it seemed a constant task to stop the squabbles and yelling. Then I realise that the reason it's so quiet is because my kids now own iPods, and they are happily off in their own world with plugs in their ears. It may be quite for me, but their heads are full of noise. Sometimes I wonder if they do it simply to have to avoid conversation, and especially me asking them for a report on how school went today.

We heard in Hebrew 3 & 4, repeated three times the phrase, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.' The writer began the letter by saying,

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Hebrews 1:1-2)

In other words, the voice of God is clear, loud and unmistakeable. Yet he makes it clear that the same temptation faces us today as it did the Israelites thousands of years ago. It is not a matter of whether we have heard His voice or not, but whether we will listen to it, believe and obey, or harden our hearts against it. He makes it very clear that this is a very serious matter:

¹² Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

An 'evil, unbelieving heart' is someone who hears His voice and hardens their heart.

I can say unequivocally that you have heard the voice of God this week. Even if nothing I have said has been of any value, you have read and heard read the words of Scripture. God has spoken here, and He has spoken specifically to you. You have heard his voice as clearly as if you had been face to face with Him - and in fact, you have been face to face with Him, because He has spoken. This has been no mere intellectual exercise - the taking in and storing of information:

¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

You have not just heard some information about God and His Word. We all stand before Him naked and exposed, and He calls us all to account. James tells us:

²² ...Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:22-25)

There are two ways you may need to respond to what you have heard in these studies:

1. If the Word of God and the reality of His presence, and the power of the Holy Spirit has come to you afresh, then the call is simple: **Obey His word**. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Jonathan Edwards wrote in his journal over his life a series of resolutions. One says: 'Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.' It's time to reject the junk food you have been eating, and to feed on both the milk and the meat of God's Word. The reason the church today is so insipid is because it has a steady diet of McDonalds - motivational talks, prosperity gospel, lights and smoke, feel-good pep talks; instead of the banquet of solid teaching from the Scriptures. Don't put up with the junk food any longer. Give yourself a steady diet of God's Word.
2. If for you this has been the first time that you have recognised that God is speaking to you, and that you have been in a place of hardness, of blocking your ears against Him speaking and covering your eyes against His glory, then do as Hebrews says: do not harden your hearts. Say simply,

'Father, I have heard your voice unmistakably in your Son, Jesus Christ. Your voice has uncovered all my shame, and shown me up to be one who is poor, wretched, pitiful blind and naked. Your voice has shown me to be a creature for whom life can only come by every word that comes from your mouth; and I have rejected that word, turning instead to the word of Satan. Your Son has come as the Word, and has clothed Himself in my humanity, and taken that humanity to the cross where he became a curse for me. By your powerful Word and Spirit, now wash me clean, and cause me to be born again. Speak to be afresh the word of Christ - the word of the cross, the word of the resurrection, and the word of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords before whom I will one day stand and give an account. I ask that, on the basis of his shed blood in his atoning death, His verdict of me may be 'Forgiven - Not Guilty'. Then, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.'