

The Briefing

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Word and Bible

The God of Word iii

In this, the final article of his series, JOHN WOODHOUSE looks at the connection between the Word of God and The Bible. Are they one and the same? Does God speak new words today?

Where there is the word of God, and faith in God because of that word, there is the totality of Christianity. (Briefing #10)

That, of course, is a paradoxical statement. But I have put it like that to highlight the fundamental and essential character of our faith. The Christian life of faith, in both Old and New Testaments, and in the experience of believers down the centuries and across the world, is brought into being and nourished, and brought to maturity by God's Word.

In the last issue of *The Briefing* we looked at the objection that this is too narrow a view of how God works—that it neglects the work of the Spirit. We saw that God's Word comes to us by God's Spirit, just as (forgive the foolish analogy) my words come to you by my breath. That makes them *my* words.

In this third and final article we come to a question that, in a sense, should have been first on our agenda: What is this 'Word of God'?

Does 'The Word of God' mean 'the Bible'?

Is it correct to assume—as I may seem to have done—that 'the Word of God' simply means 'the Bible'?

We should not move too quickly to that identification. It is not as obvious as we might assume. Certainly in the Bible the phrase 'the Word of God' does not always mean 'the Bible'. When Paul said, "Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God", he did not mean "Pick up your Bibles"!

The issue here is not whether the Bible is the word of God. Upon that most of us agree. But

at the present time there is an uneasiness with the proposition that the word of God is, for us, no more than the Bible. What if God is speaking other things, not, of course, at odds with the Bible, but nevertheless independent of the Bible. Are we guilty of quenching the Spirit and rejecting prophecy if the only word of God we hear is the Bible? Do we really have all of Christianity where there is only the Bible word of God, and the faith in God it brings about?

The question, in other words, has to do with the sufficiency of scripture. This is the issue that gave rise to Martin Luther's slogan *sola scriptura*—scripture alone: that not only is Scripture the Word of God, but *only* Scripture is the Word of God. This is a much neglected issue, which has received very little recent attention from Evangelicals. What is the basis, and what are the implications of the Reformers' view that the Word of God is the Bible and the Bible alone?

It depends what you mean by ...

We need to begin by clarifying our terms. Before we ask, *Is God speaking new words today?* we need to work out what we mean by 'God speaking'. An illustration might help.

Suppose a Christian friend says to me "I think your sermons are too long". Is God speaking to me? Since God is in control of all things, they are certainly the words he wants me to hear at that moment. Is it God's will that I take notice and shorten my sermons? Could well be! God is certainly accomplishing his purposes by controlling speaking events, because he is accomplishing his purposes by controlling all events. However, it *may* be more pleasing to God if I ▸

take up with my friend his slack attitude to the teaching of the Bible—and keep preaching just as long. That is at least a possibility!

Is God speaking new words today? It depends somewhat on what you mean by God speaking. What would not be right, however, is to describe my friend's wise and helpful comment as 'the Word of God'.

There is an event in the New Testament which illustrates this point. In Acts 21:4 we find that some Christians in Tyre 'through the Spirit urged Paul *not* to go on to Jerusalem'. But Paul was not disobedient to God when he *did* go on to Jerusalem. These words, which in some sense were through the Spirit, were not what the New Testament calls 'the word of God'. The word of God is, as Peter put it, "the word that was preached to you" (1 Pt 1:25). It is what is elsewhere called 'the gospel'.

So we must ask another question.

What does the Bible mean by 'the Word of God'?

This is an important and not a self-evident question. What *did* Paul have in mind when he wrote "take the sword of the Spirit"? If he didn't mean "pick up your Bibles", neither did he have in mind something vague and indefinable. He (and his readers) knew what he meant. And it was clear and precise.

(1) 'The Word about God' and 'the Word from God'.

Firstly, the phrase 'the Word of God' can have two senses. Both of these are to be found in the New Testament. It is the Word *about* God, but it is also the Word *from* God. It is God's Word about God. In some contexts one of these senses will be more important than the other.

(2) 'The Word of God' is the apostolic gospel. In the New Testament 'the word of God' is that which *has been received from the apostle*. (See such texts as Acts 6:2; 11:1; 18:11; Col. 1:25.) *That* is the word of God which is the sword of the Spirit. *That* is the word of God which Paul says is at

In the New Testament 'the word of God' is that which *has been received from the apostle*.

work in the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess. 2:13). The Word of God is, as Peter put it 'the word that was preached to you' (1 Pet. 1:25).

(3) 'The Word of God' is a given, known message.

There is, from the earliest New Testament writings, a sense of 'givenness' about the Word of God. It is a message which the

apostles realize they have received, and which they authoritatively pass on (1 Cor. 15:3ff). This is what they call 'the Word of God'.

It is the same throughout the Bible. There are moments of history when God makes known his purposes, when he reveals his grace—moments when he *speaks*. He spoke his promise to Abraham and restated and expanded it at Mt Sinai. He spoke his promise to David. He spoke through the prophets. Indeed,

...in many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son... (Heb. 1:1-2a).

And God's Word once spoken does not fade away, but remains and accomplishes his purposes (Is. 55:11). Once spoken, it is addressed not just to those who first heard it, but to succeeding generations—and just as immediately and directly to them as it was to the original hearers (we saw that especially in Deuteronomy 4 in The God of Word i, *Briefing* #10). Note how the author of Hebrews introduces Old Testament quotations with "The Holy Spirit *says*..."—present tense (Heb. 3:7; cf. 9:8; 10:15-17).

The New Testament repeatedly speaks of the word of God in this sense—a word that is known, a word that has been received, yet by the work of God's Spirit a word that continues to be at work. This is the 'sword of the Spirit', the word that brings about new birth, the word which calls forth faith in its hearers.

(4) 'The Word of God' received from the apostles is complete.

Now the question is: *Is this Word of God which was received from the apostles complete?* The New Testament is very clear.

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because

God chose you from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in *the truth*. To this he called you through *our gospel*, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to *the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter*. (2 Thess. 2:13-15)

The words in italics refer to what Paul goes on, in 3:1, to call 'the Word of the Lord':

Finally, brethren, pray for us, that *the word of the Lord* may speed on and triumph, as it did among you.

This Word has been given, indeed entrusted:

O Timothy, guard *what has been entrusted to you*. (1 Tim. 6:20).

But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day *what has been entrusted to me*. Follow the pattern of *the sound words which you have heard from me*, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard *the truth* that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. (2 Tim. 1:12b-14)

Of a bishop, we read:

... he must hold firm to *the sure word as taught*, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it. (Titus 1:9).

John wrote:

Anyone who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. (2 Jn. 9).

And Jude:

Beloved, being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which *was once for all delivered to the saints*. (Jude 3).

In other words, within the New Testament it is clear that this Word of God is now complete, at least 'until that Day'. We cannot add to this Word for the totality of Christianity, any more than we can add to Christ. *Where there is this Word of God, and faith in God because of it, there is the totality of Christianity.*

(5) God continues to speak that Word.

The New Testament is clear that in the Christian's experience God will continue to speak. But the Word he speaks is not something new. In the words of the hymn:

God yet speaketh—by his Spirit
Speaketh to the hearts of men,
In the age-long word expounding
God's own message now as then;

The age-long word is still the sword of the Spirit. It is *that* word which is at work in you

who believe. It is the gospel. It is the message of Christ crucified, risen, ascended.

What about the Bible?

The word of God once received, and written down, continues to be the living word of the living God—thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit. This is a thoroughly familiar idea in the Bible itself.

The Bible exists precisely because there were those who heeded the apostolic injunction to guard what had been entrusted to them by the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, in the Bible the phrase 'the Word of God' does not always mean 'the Bible'. But the Bible *is* the Word of God. And it is complete.

To suggest that there is more to the Word of God than the Bible is to suggest that there is more to the Word of God than that which was entrusted to the apostles (an idea contrary to the New Testament) or that they failed to pass on adequately their trust (which is contrary to the evidence).

The question *Is there more to the word of God than the Bible?* can now be seen in a proper light: *Is there more to Christ than the apostolic gospel which has been delivered to us in the Bible?*

Do we really have all of Christianity where there is only the word of the Bible and the faith in God that it brings about? You might as well ask: Do we really have all of Christianity when we have all of Christ?

Conclusions

1 Christian life and ministry will be marked by faith in God created by his word. It will only be possible to persist in such a ministry by that *faith*. The latest counselling technique or church growth formula will be a challenge to that faith. We are tempted to put our trust in all manner of alternatives to the word of God. That temptation has always been, and always will be with us.

2 The Christian life and ministry will be marked by *prayer*. It is the word of God which I have heard, and which is at work in me. If I believe that, I will pray.

3 It is the word of God that is the source of our faith and the content of our ministry. *All things* must be subordinated to the goal of seeing the word of God heard, and understood, and believed.

COMMENTARY

Edited by
David Peterson (NT) and John Woodhouse (OT)

Colossians/Philemon

The letter to the Colossians gives us precious insights into aspects of Paul's teaching that are only alluded to in his other writings. As the apostle deals with false teaching, he develops a magnificent picture of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ and its implications for us. Most commentaries on Colossians also deal with the letter to Philemon which reveals Paul in another light, dealing with a particular problem of personal relationships.

The most detailed study of these letters is provided by P.T. O'Brien (Word, 1982). Although this commentary is based on careful exegesis of the Greek text, it is written in such a way as to be understandable by most readers.

F.F. Bruce's contribution to the New International Commentary of the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1984) is less technical and offers a commentary on Ephesians in the same volume, which is good value for money.

The older commentaries by J.B. Lightfoot (1876) and C.F.D. Moule (1968) still have much to offer the thoughtful student of Colossians and Philemon. N. Wright has written the new Tyndale commentary (1986) on these epistles which is more helpful than the previous edition by H. Carson.

Dick Lucas contributes his commentary entitled *Fullness and Freedom* to the Bible Speaks Today series (1980). This may be the best way into Colossians for the average reader for it not only works hard at interpreting the text but applies it to contemporary issues.

Esther

There are not many books in the Bible that do not mention God! In fact there are only two: Esther and the Song of Songs. These two books

provide more difficulty than most in understanding how they are 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work' (2 Tim 3:16). Esther is a book that explains the origin of the feast of Purim, and celebrates a national deliverance, not explicitly by divine intervention, but through political intrigue.

Joyce Baldwin, *Esther*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP, 1984) provides a quite thorough treatment of the issues raised by the book, although in the end I think that her conclusions about the relevance of the book ('The unseen hand behind the events of Susa is no less active in guiding history today') are not really satisfactory.

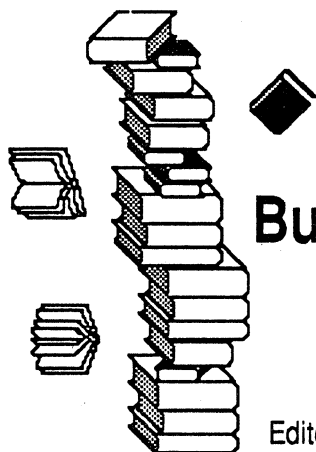
Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible 7B (Doubleday, 1971) is a less conservative and more technical commentary, which treats the book as 'a historical novel'.

A very detailed literary study, for those with access to a theological library, and willing to do a lot of work is Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Scholars Press, 1979).

The best commentary, in my opinion is in David Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New Century Bible Commentary (Eerdmans, 1984) — a little frustrating in his failure to draw conclusions on questions like historicity, but he lays out the evidence thoroughly and clearly, and has many good insights.

Missing a few *Commentary Comments* because you didn't subscribe from issue #1? See page 8 for how to order back issues of *The Briefing*.

BRIEFING BACK ISSUES



Building the Christian Library

Edited by Chris Moroney

Gospel and Kingdom

A Christian Interpretation
of the Old Testament
(Paternoster, 1981)

"The boy David defeated the giant Goliath with God's help. Like David, we too can beat the giants in our lives, boys and girls. All we have to do is rely on God."

Scripture Seminar, Education Week, 1988

The misuse of Old Testament stories as fables or allegories is still a danger in our Christian education programmes. Not only are we giving children and adults wrong ideas about how to relate to our Heavenly Father, but we are also teaching a piecemeal approach to reading the Scriptures.

Gospel and Kingdom is a very useful book in overcoming these dangers. The basic premise of the book is that one needs to understand the overall purpose of the Bible in order to interpret the individual parts. For Goldsworthy, that purpose is summed up in two concepts: the rule of God (called KINGDOM) and the proclamation about God's king, Jesus (called GOSPEL).

The book moves through the different phases of the Old Testament, showing how the particulars of the stories can be categorised into themes and related to the gospel news of Jesus Christ. The chapters progressively show how the kingdom of God is revealed in the flow of the Old Testament, from Eden, through Israel as a nation, to prophecy. The culmination of kingdom revelation is Jesus Christ. This 'Christian' view of the Old Testament, gives us a frame-

work in which to rightly interpret Old Testament stories.

For instance, in the story of David and Goliath, with whom should we identify? With the Israelites who benefitted from their champion's success. Jesus is our true David who has fought his enemy, and brought him down, rescuing his people from the captivity of sin and the affliction of death and judgement. He has defeated our giant enemy, Satan.

Gospel and Kingdom is only a short book, but it is neither thin on theology nor on essential detail. Big themes like 'covenant' and 'kingdom' are dealt with broadly yet helpfully. A number of diagrams draw connections between events and concepts.

The language is at times a little complicated, but the content is valuable enough to make the effort worthwhile.

Principles of interpretation are illustrated all through the book, and spelt out in Chapter 10. The final chapter gives many famous examples of faulty applications with suitable corrections.

This deceptively simple survey of the Old Testament is essential reading for any teacher of the Bible—for anyone, in fact, who wants to come to grips with understanding the Old Testament.

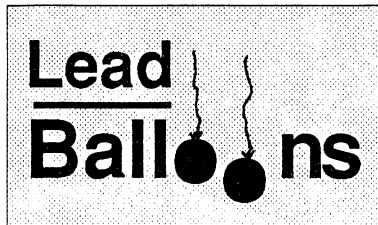
The cost of missionaries

The Church Missionary Society has recently written to its members asking them to consider their level of support, both financially and in prayer. CMS is one of the leading Evangelical mission societies in Australia and employs 160 missionaries, including 16 new missionaries going onto the field in the next few months.

With demand on the Christian dollar on the increase, and the devaluation of the Australian currency, CMS (along with other missionary societies) is feeling the pinch. They ended the last financial year with an accumulated deficit of \$182,845. With the increase in the number of missionaries, and to pay off the deficit, CMS needs an increase in contributions of 39%.

Missionary work is often one of the first things to go in our allocation of money and time. For this reason, we wanted to bring this information to your attention.

(For information on how to give to CMS, contact their Sydney Branch on (02) 267 3711.)



The Teenager is Dead

It will leave our churches non-plussed. It may perhaps put our youth departments on the dole queue. It will cause parents to breathe a sigh of relief. And yet this news just slipped quietly into our world through a minor column in a morning newspaper: The Teenager is Dead.

The '50s and '60s saw the rise of the youth culture. And following hard on this new phenomenon came its parasite—youth directed advertising. The advent of a new target group necessitated new strategies to relieve it of its pocket-money. But in 1988 the advertiser has declared the teenager to be dead.¹

It seems that there is no longer a 'youth culture'. This age group is now divided into multifarious segments, too diverse for any one advertising strategy.

What will our youth ministries do? How will we cope with our bereavement? Before the sad demise of the teenager, the strategy used to be simple. To market the gospel you simply needed a youth worker who would:

- buy a pair of jeans
- get the right haircut (or lack thereof)
- hang out in the right places (usually on a beanbag)
- begin 'building bridges' with youth

Youth workers had to 'identify' with the youth culture, in the hope that there would be a gospel harvest sometime in the future (usually after the youth worker's retirement).

But what do we do when the thing we were supposed to identify with has been pronounced dead? Where will we build our bridges to?

Before we hang up our jeans in disgust, let us notice something else that slipped into the paper. It is quite evident to anyone who drinks at the local milkbar that our world still possesses young people in the age group formerly occupied by the late lamented 'teenager'. And you

know what? It may sound unbelievable, even heretical, but these 'entities' which have replaced the teenager don't need us to build any bridges!

How do we reach such a shattering conclusion? This is the age group that doesn't like beating around the bush. The Rock Music of the '80s is increasingly passionate and message oriented. Artists such as Midnight Oil, Tracey Chapman, Bruce Springsteen, and John Cougar Mellencamp, have been described as "too committed to be subtle".² Perhaps we Christians should be 'too committed' to bother with the

**It may sound
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subtleties of 'bridge building'.

Added to this is the fact that this age group is already looking for what our message promises. People under 25 are the most likely group in our society to believe in life after death.³ Don't Christians believe in that too? And don't we believe that Jesus is the one handing it out?

Thank goodness the teenager is dead! Now we can stop all that interminable one-step-behind-you-bridge-building stuff and get on with saying: "Hey, do you want to live forever? Jesus says you can."



1. Sydney Morning Herald, July, 1988

2. Deborah Cameron, SMH, 9/7/88

3. Saulwick Poll, SMH, 11/7/88

INTERCHANGE...

We are keen to see the interchange of ideas and opinion take place through the pages of *The Briefing* and to this end we have renamed our feedback section. We hope that this will emphasise the way we want *The Briefing* to develop. If you disagree with something, and/or have a helpful perspective to offer, please write and tell us about it—so that we can share it with everyone.

Alfred Holland, Bishop of Newcastle, dropped us a line:

"I enjoy reading *The Briefing* and although I might not agree in every particular, I find the articles invigorating and thought provoking. I hope you can maintain the high level that you have begun.

"I was interested in your Lead Balloons, Issue 8, pp 6-7 about some present confirmation services. Your rhetorical question "Can you imagine bishops giving up their right to

conduct confirmation services?" which clearly expected a negative answer, might find that many bishops would be only too glad to be free of confirmation services, in order to concentrate on parish worship and particularly the teaching of the faithful.

"In addition I believe that the alternative that you suggest of removing confirmation from the realm of bishops altogether so that the local pastor could confirm is already being done in the Roman Catholic Church, where I believe the parish priest can seek authority from the bishop to confirm..."

A worthwhile point. If the bishops don't mind letting go of confirmation, perhaps we might see some changes.

And did you spot the error in our last issue? The cover said Issue #10 instead of Issue #11—it is bound to become a collector's item so hang onto it.

For parish councils, committees of management, deacons and church committees, there is now a regular source of input and encouragement. Look for your preview copy in this issue of *The Briefing*.

GOOD STEWARDS

A Briefing Module for the Church Committee

BRIEFING BACK ISSUES

Preview Edition

The Sins of Jimmy Swaggart
Giving the Aesthetes a Black Eye
Canberra Christian Youth Convention

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Intro to Basic Books
Who Censors the Censor?
Fellowship of Medical Evangelism

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You CAN get there from here

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The Gospel to Greeks

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Bible Overview
When Tradition is a good thing after all
Ritual and Reality

Briefing #10

The God of Word
Ephesians/Chronicles
A spurious letter



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