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What 9s Primal?

by Stephen E. Fletcher

A primal Christian may be defined as one whose knowledge is experiential. The Bible is the record of that experience and, as such, stands under it.



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iblical theology must be ever on guard lest the vehicle be confused with the message. Most scholars recognize words as vehicles for thought and in translation seek to render the thought accurately even if particular words are not equivalent. Many of the Biblical concepts conveyed by the words are themselves vehicles for the message rather than the message per se. For example, in the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the vehicular concepts include a Hades of flaming torment and Abraham as the comforter of those who endured suffering in life. Neither of these "biblical" concepts is the message. They were commonly held views of life-after-death which Jesus used to pound home the message that rich people should use their riches to help the poor and suffering, and that now is the time to do it because once

we are dead it is too late. To argue from this passage that heaven and hell are like that, is worse than irrelevant. It is idolatry of the Bible.

Here it will be helpful to look at scripture through the eyes of those who wrote it and not make more nor less of the Bible than the Bible makes of itself.

Paul

The great proof-text for the authority and inspiration of scripture is 2 Timothy 3:16—"All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." The first thing for us to consider is the meaning and scope of "inspired by God." To insert the concept of verbal inspiration is clearly unjustified. If that is what Paul was concerned about—verbal inerrency—he would have said so. Rather, Paul is here talking about the initiative of God. The inspiration to write or to prophesy or to "sing a new song" came from God. It was for a particular time and situation, but not just for a particular time or situation. It was also for

Romans 4:23-24. "But the words... were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also."

The second thing to consider is the authority of scripture in Paul's view-point. He does not say, "All scripture is inspired by God and the authority..." but merely "profitable." And profitable seems to be the extent of it in Paul's opinion. It is profitable for precisely what he says: "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." It is a text, but the teacher is God, and the touch-stone of authority is Christ Jesus.

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

-Romans 15:4-6

How quickly Paul moves away from scripture to the God of scripture and his power to bring our lives into "accord with Christ Jesus" the authority.

The Bible is not so much the authority for Paul as many have thought. He does use it to support an argument (1 Corinthians 9), but an argument with those who are being wooed by some who would make the Bible of that day into the authority—a virtual rule book. These were itinerant Judaisers that were spreading a rigid sort of fundamentalism in the churches Paul had started. In his own quotation of scripture in this instance he goes on to show that he is not under the authority of scripture (the Law) but of Christ. Paul was clearly a primal Christian.

Peter

or Peter the most significant aspect of scripture was its prophetic quality. He used scripture for moral instruction,² but what

2 ". . . as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:15-16) See also 1 Peter 2:

really excited Peter was the way scripture prophesies the present. Of the Old Testament prophets he says:

It was revealed to them that they were serving

not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. —1 Peter 1:12

And for Peter the interesting thing was that the prophets themselves were unsatisfied: they "searched and inquired" about "what person or time was indicated." (1 Peter 1:10-11) The prophecy was incomplete until it was fulfilled by Christ.

For Peter, the fulfillment was most spectacular in Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain in the presence of just himself, James, and John. This was an experience Peter never forgot, and he recalls it in his second letter³ with excited emphasis: "we were

³ We are not unaware of the disputed authorship of 2 Peter. The facts that Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian and Clement, writing at the end of the second century, did not quote from 2 Peter while they did from 1 Peter; that Origen (A.D. 217-251) is the earliest of the Church Fathers to mention 2 Peter, and then as being doubtful; and that Eusebius described 2 Peter as 'disputed, nevertheless familiar to the majority'; have led Albert E. Barnett to conclude that the letter is pseudonymous. (Interpreters Bible, Vol. 12, p. 163) However, Merrill C. Tenney—New Testament Survey (Grand Rapids: William B. Eardmans Publishing Co., 1961), p. 367—states our position for this writing:

The epistle bears no traces of heresy; there is nothing in it which Peter could not have written; and it is not embellished with biographical details which are obviously imaginative, as so many apocryphal works are. Since conclusive proof of spuriousness is lacking, it will be treated here as genuine.

For those who insist that the preponderance of evidence is to the contrary, the conclusions for primal Christianity drawn from 2 Peter are no less valid because they reflect the position of a second century Christian than they would be if they reflected the position of the first century Peter.

eyewitnesses," "we heard his voice," "we were with him." (2 Peter 1:16-18) It was this personal experience that was the basis of Peter's preaching of the "power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ," in contrast to the "cleverly devised myths" of the current and popular Gnosis-thought. It was this personal primal experience that validated for Peter the prophetic word of scripture concerning the Messiah. For him there was no longer any doubt—Jesus was the Christ. The prophetic word was sure, corroborated by his own experience.

To those who had not been privileged to see the transfiguration—to us—Peter says, "you will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning

Personal primal experience of Christ is as much greater.

This is the testimony of every primal Christian.

star rises in your hearts." (2 Peter 1:19) We will do well to pay attention to the prophecy of scripture concerning the Messiah, and the corroborating eyewitness account of Peter (which has now become scripture for us). In other words, for those who have not personally seen Christ, the Messiah, Jesus; or who have not witenessed his resurrected presence in the person of the Holy Spirit; or who have not experienced the transforming power of Agape-love; for these, scripture (both in Old Testament prophesy and New Testament corroboration) is like a lamp or nightlight.

But-and here is Peter's significant implication-when the day dawns, and we see clearly in the splendor of morning all which at night could only be seen dimly and piece-meal, we no longer need the lamp. Personal primal experience of Christ is as much greater than scripture, as the dawn is greater than a nightlight. This is the testimony of every primal Christian. It is our own koinonia with the living Lord and with the living fellowship of the church which animates us, directs us, controls us. It is not scripture that brings us to life, but the living presence of the Spirit of God himself. In reading the testimony of Scripture, however, we are often brought into the presence of the Lord by the fellowship with others writing in scripture, who were (are) in the presence of the same Lord.

For the primal Christian, scripture provides sweet fellowship with saints who have gone before. The primal experience has brought them into a koinonia, into a family. It is always a joy to meet a brother or sister, especially when it is by surprise. And when the brother or sister is from another part of the world and another age and tongue, but speaking the same primal 'language' which be-

⁴ We are not referring to glossolalia or speaking in tongues, but to the ''language'' of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

longs to the "family"—what a surprise and joy! Who would have guessed that the eternal Christ would have touched the prophet's life or Psalmist's life just as he has ours? So we read not laws and precepts so much as testimonies. This is a good check on our own religious experience. If our religious experience is merely our own imaginative invention, the scripture will be dull and opaque to us. But if our religious experience is of God, it will illuminate scripture and bring it to life. We will see what they were writing about from the vantage point of the same thing having happened to us.

We should note Peter's use of the term "word of God" and how it contrasts with some current popular use.

You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for "all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord abides for ever." That word is the good news which was preached to you.

—1 Peter 1:23-25

For Peter the word of God is not scripture but the preached good news. Archibald M. Hunter paraphrases Peter: "You have read in Isaiah of a word of God which abides when all else fails and falls. Well, that word is the gospel." In other words,

"You have read in Isaiah about a word of God, but you did not read the word of God. Rather, you heard the word of God yourself when God spoke the word through the preachers who brought you the good news."

Incidentally, Peter's concept of the "word of god" is an accurate reflection of Isaiah who saw the "word of our God" (Isaiah 40:8) as an active and vital word that, far from being written, "goes forth from my mouth." (Isaiah 55:8-11)

It seems a natural and innocent step to apply the term "word of God" to the Bible, or at least to the New Testament, since it is a record of the good news that was preached. But the subtle shift from "preaching" to a "record of preaching" is terribly significant. It is a shift from a living word to a dead word—dead, even though it is about life. The living word "abides for ever" (1 Peter 1:25), not by being written down but by being translated into Life which, by its contagion, spreads and lives on, ever "speaking" afresh the good news of Emmanuel, "God with us."

An excellent example of a record of preaching is Peter's first sermon in Acts 2:14-42. But to read this, or to hear it read aloud, is not preaching. And it is not the word of God, though it was the word of God to the 3,000 who believed. It is not the word of God now because God would not speak in these words to us, though he did to them. The passage means a great deal to many Christians (this Christian, for one), but it is because we have immersed ourselves in the Biblical events. We have learned how the Israelites longed for past glory to be restored. We have learned how precious were the prophecies of a Messiah who like his father David would be a tender and sensitive judge, but more important, a skillful and energetic leader capable of putting enemies to flight and bringing power and glory to Israel. We are moved vicariously by this record of Peter's preaching because we have identi-

⁵ The Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), Vol. 12, p. 105, Exegesis.

fied with the "Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven." (Acts 2:5) But the word of God is never received vicariously, else it is not the word of God but merely words about God, or words about the word of God.

A problem with traditional Christianity is its preachers are too humble. They would not presume to have a gospel of their own, or be so bold as to refer to "my gospel" the way Paul did. (Romans 2:16, 16:25, 2 Tim. 2:8) Instead, they preach a secondhand gospel. If they preach it well, they preface it with good exegesis of the sources and apply it to life with modern illustrations to bridge the cultural chasm. The result is a fairly accurate presentation (even though secondhand) of the gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ. If they preach it poorly, they are careless about sources, saying, "The Bible says . . . etc." The result is a fuzzy mixture of the Good News of Jesus Christ and the bad news of first century superstitions and fears. Many traditional Christian churches are made up largely of believers who have been persuaded by this secondhand preaching of the gospel. The wonderthe miracle—is that so many have a personal primal experience with the living, loving Lord. It is evidence of his initiative.

God is alive and his word is continually being spoken. Therefore, what the church needs is primal Christians with a gospel of their own that is firsthand, not contrary to the gospel of our Lord, but indeed, the living Word of God, again breaking out with authority. Primal Christianity is our gospel, not in the possessive sense (except that it possesses us), but in the sense of exciting us, enlivening us, and giving us a first-hand story to tell. God is alive and he is speaking, but some are not hearing because so many think the word of God is a book. We must not refer to the Bible as the word of God lest the world, to say nothing of the church, be led to expect nothing more and hence miss the Word when he reaches out to us, which is precisely what has happened. And this brings us to a consideration of Logos.

John

Christ, Christians become familiar with the Greek word logos. In their use of the word it is almost always capitalized because it is used as a synonym for the eternal Christ. This is not wrong, but it is confusing since most Christians do not have a very clear conception of its origin and meaning.

In the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament), logos is one of two words for "word,"

the other being rema. 6 In Genesis through

⁶ The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, New York: Abingdon Press, 1962, "The Word"; Vol. R-Z, p. 868

Deuteronomy, rema is more frequent. The reason for the popularity of logos among Christians is, of course, John's use of it in the prologue of his Gospel (John 1:1-18)—"In the beginning was the Word (Logos)..." But what is not often realized is that after the fourteenth verse of the first chapter, John does not use logos again. Rather, he refers to the "the Son" and his identity with "the Father," which, more than logos, was his theme concerning Jesus. With rema more frequent in the first part of the Septuagint and with "the Son" his own preferred title for Jesus, why did John use logos for Christ in his prologue? There are a number of reasons.

First, there was Hebrew culture and tradition. In Genesis the world was created by the spoken word of God. So John could say, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." For the Hebrew there is power in the spoken word. Whether rema or logos is beside the point—what the Greeks call it is irrelevant to the original Hebrew. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible has this to say in its article on "The Word":

That power would be attributed to God's word is not surprising, but it is also attributed to the words of men, particularly to blessings and curses. Words still possess, in Hebrew thought, the quality of a magic spell. A word once uttered takes on a life of its own beyond the control of the speaker and achieves its effect by a kind of innate power.⁷

7 Ibid., p. 869.

So by using "the Word" for Christ, John was communicating to Hebrew mind "power"—creative, effective power. He could have used rema just as well as logos for the Greek-speaking Jew since the concept he was communicating was the spoken word. But there were two other reasons for choosing logos.

There was Stoicism. About 300 B.C.E. the Greek philosopher, Zeno, lectured in the Stoa Poecile (painted porch) from which the Stoics got their name. Zeno taught a kind of pantheistic materialism. He held that we can only know what we can feel with our senses. Matter is reality. It gets its form and identity from God, or Force, which permeates the universe as a "fiery vapor, very

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subtle but nevertheless definitely material in substance."

The interesting point for our study is that the Stoics called this shaper of reality Logos. Later, in the second century B.C.E. the Stoics began to see Logos in more spiritual terms as divine reason and the soul of nature.

At about the time of Christ the Jewish philosopher in Alexandria, Philo, though not himself a Stoic, had picked up Stoic terminology—specifically, Logos—and was using this terminology to teach that the Mosaic Law was the foundation of philosophy. In his writings, especially in his retelling of the creation story, Logos is the creative word, a sort of intermediary between God and his creation. Logos was both the ideal pattern of creation in the Platonic sense, and the instrument through which God made all that he made. Philo referred to the Logos as God's "first-born son" (protogonos uios) his "image" (eikon), "shadow" (skia), "ambassador" (presbeutes), man's "advocate" (parakletos), and "high priest" (archiereus).8

8 Ibid., p. 870.

John was not ignorant of all this philosophical and religious swirl. Secular Greek and philosophical Jewish thought were so close, yet so far from the truth. In Jesus Christ, John saw all that they were reaching out after, and declared, "The Logos became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." To paraphrase, John might have said, "You want to know and understand this Logos you are talking about? Look at Jesus. He is the Logos in the flesh." Wilbert F. Howard has put it well: "Jesus is not to be interpreted by Logos; Logos is intelligible only as we think of Jesus."

⁹ Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 8, p. 442.

Another reason for John's use of *logos* was the growing popularity of gnosis-thought¹⁰ which was

10 Paul W. Lapp in his course, Biblical Problems in Light of Recent Archaeological Discoveries (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1970), stated that Gnosticism was defined by the Archaeological Congress in Messina (1966) as beginning with Valentinius in 140 A.D.; and that to avoid confusion we should use the term "gnosisthought" rather than "gnosticism" for that occurring before 140 A.D.

seeping into Christian thought. In brief, gnosisthought involved a dualism between good and evil, heaven (light) being good and the world (darkness) being evil. Since a good God could not have created an evil world, the gnosis viewpoint was that there must have been emanations or powers, one from another beginning with the good God of light but becoming progressively darker, each having control over an intervening spiritual realm. Logos was one of the higher emanations of God.¹¹ Thus, human-

11 According to Paul Lapp (Ibid.), full-blown Gnosticism by 170 A.D. had extended the dualism of light and darkness to spirit and matter respectively. The evil material world was created by Yaldabaoth who was born of Sophia (Wisdom) and a monster in the lowest realm above the world. It all began some fifteen spiritual generations before when the First Father or Abyss (1) took Thought and brought forth Mind or Jesus; who (2) took Truth and brought forth Word or Logos; who (3) took Life . . . etc.

ity, trapped in the darkness of the evil world, was somehow to travel through the intervening realms without being caught by the spiritual rulers. The only hope was gnosis—the spiritual, quasimagical knowledge that would, like a pass-word, get one safely from one realm to another. The Apostle Paul shows familiarity with this sort of gnosis-thought when he says,

We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.¹²

12 Ephesians 6:12. See also Ephesians 3:10.

The fact that Paul speaks of "principalities and powers" in letters to Rome and Colossae as well as Ephesus is an indication of either how widespread gnosis-thought was, or else how serious Paul regarded it to be. John's reply to all of this dualistic inventiveness was a profound proclamation of radical unity:

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 anything made that was made. —John 1:1-3

Conclusion

sing the term "the Word" or the phrase "the word of God" as a synonym for the Bible is natural enough since for many it is the only word from God they recognize. It points to Jesus Christ and gives a superior pattern for life.

le. They would not presume to have a gospel of their own, or be so bold a secondhand gospel.

The Bible serves as a check against spiritual fantasies being embraced as gospel truth.

But with the background for the meaning of "the word of God" as it appears in scripture, to use it as a synonym for the Bible misrepresents both the Bible and the Word. The real power of God is Jesus Christ and his Spirit. The Bible is the word about this Word.

Once the living God primally touches a person, the Bible, call it what we may, paradoxically fades in significance. What we are calling for is a radical re-evaluation, nay, a revaluation of the term "the word of God," conforming more closely with its use in scripture, and a fearless change in our religious vocabulary to conform with the findings. The Bible is more accurately a witness to the authority than an authority in its own right. Thus, to make the Bible our authority is to by-pass the Authority. We have seen that the Bible is inspired in the sense of being the result of God's initiative rather than human initiative, but that verbal inspiration and inerrency are of little interest to primal Christians like Paul and other New Testament writers. Primal Christians, while they do not give their allegiance to the

Bible (since allegiance belongs to Christ), find the Bible wonderful.

Facts are impressive—acts are wonderful. When one is no more than "impressed" by an act of God, that should stir wonder. The act is reduced to a fact for him or her. On the other hand, when one wonders about a mere fact, the focus is enlarged to include the act of God behind the fact.

The Bible is not so much factual as it is actual. In common usage, "actual" means real while "factual" means accurate. But the roots of the word are more obvious: "actual" having to do with action and "factual" having to do with facts. Either way, in the vernacular, or according to the root, the Bible is more real than merely accurate. It is more about the action and reaction of God and humanity than it is a mere collection of scientific and historical facts.

It may be said that there are two kinds of attitudes: that which is impressed by the facts of God and that which wonders about the acts of God.

What we have been saying is that Jesus is the authority; Jesus is the measure of the New Testament.

God is alive and He is speaking, but some are not hearing because so many think the word of God is a book.



Martin Marty: 1983 KSR Lecturer

Dr. Martin Marty will be the KSR Lecturer for 1983, giving a lecture for the public in Woodruff Auditorium, Kansas Union Building, April 21, 8:00 p.m. There is no charge to the public. He will spend the day on the University of Kansas campus.

Dr. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone distinguished service professor in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago and associate editor of the *Christian Century*. He joined the faculty at Chicago in 1963 after ten years of Lutheran pastoral ministry. He is the author of 18 books written in 18 years, his works include *Righteous Empire*, A Nation of Behavers and The Public Church. In 1972 he received the National Book Award.

Dr. Marty also writes the fortnightly newsletter Context and co-edits the quarterly Church History.

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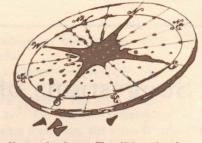
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Traverse Log



The good-ol-days in religion are returning.

We are witnessing a renewal of styles of piety and a retreat into earlier orthodoxy. Traditional values are recapturing young minds. Patriotism has again hove into sight. The permissive moral climate of recent years is getting increasing criticism. Past family life systems are drawing more interest. Distinctive private religious schools are growing as are their distinctive curricula.

For some people these trends are a hefty adrenalin splash; for some, they revive a dyspeptic memory. Some effects of this motion are beneficial. Standing knee deep in muddied moral waters for a couple of decades, we needed some clarity and definition. The recent me-generation style limped far too long on borrowed time. Religion centered essentially on salty issues did indeed lose its savor, and thereby produced a breed of Atari churchmen. The new return of old religion should be welcome.

And some effects of this motion are frightening. One impact high on the religious Richter scale is the potential for intolerance. For instance, the statement by a Southern Baptist leader that God does not hear the prayers of Jews might qualify for the Golden Turkey Award. The remark by a California Moral Majority member that a God-fearing government would execute homosexuals forces an alarmingly narrow doctrine. There is an allegation in an Oklahoma city of a God-squad among the police, some officers who stop at church with their prisoners on the way to jail. If that practice is true (it is denied), there is another place needing tolerance.

Another effect from the dish of hot potatoes served up by this return is a tendency to close off thinking. It may be more back-to-basics than creative, because safety discourages adventure.

Students of the late Arthur Hays know the story of the medieval charcoal burner. A certain charcoal maker was so poorly equipped that all he could do to earn a living was burn wood into coals to be used for medicinal purposes. His faith was so simple that he subscribed carte blanche to his inherited creed.

When eventually he lay dying, the devil came and sat on his bed. The visitor interrogated him about his faith, in order to trip him up and get his soul. Of course, the charcoal burner repeated the pat answers he had been taught long before. He was safe; upon dying he escaped the clutches of the devil and went to his reward!

Later on, the doctor of the theology lay dying. The devil perched on his bedpost to await his soul. In response to the questions of the eager evil one, the learned doctor gave detailed answers. Plied with more thought provoking questions, the scholar refined and divided his answers. Finally it became evident that the dying docent's faith was so unorthodox that the devil was about to get him.

But he wised up and just before his last breath he announced, "My belief is the same as the faith of the charcoal burner!" And the angels came and bore his soul to glory.

But that was only in the story. Lest we feel that thinking can be replaced by running for the cover of another day's answers, let us be reminded—we are living not in the sweet bye and bye but in the nasty here and now. Relevant theology is an adventure.

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