

The Hermeneutic of the Apostolic Gospel

by Robert Hach

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed,...hav[ing] been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:14, 15).

“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:23).

The renewal of New Testament (NT) Christian faith calls for a radical paradigm shift, that is, a shift from an ecclesiastical/mystical paradigm to a rhetorical/hermeneutical paradigm. The term *rhetoric* signifies *the art of persuasion*, the process of employing language to influence behavior through belief (i.e., faith), while the term *hermeneutics* refers to *the art of interpretation*, the process of understanding language in both spoken and written forms. Rather than a religious experience of God that is mediated through ecclesiastical organizations and mystical sensations, *NT Christian faith is a rhetorical/hermeneutical experience of God*. That is, an experience of persuasion that grows out of an understanding of the biblical message.

Christian Faith as Rhetorical/Hermeneutical Experience

The biblical message, according to the testimony of the Bible itself, is Jesus’ *gospel of the kingdom of God*, which reveals God’s promise to forgive sinners and to resurrect the community of faith from death to everlasting life in his *eschatological* kingdom (from Greek, *eschaton*, literally, *last*, as in the last things: the *parousia* of Jesus, the resurrection of the dead, the day of judgment and the kingdom of God). The purpose of reading the Bible is *to understand and be persuaded by its message*, thus coming to a rhetorical/hermeneutical (and life-transforming) experience of God. To call this experience both *rhetorical* and *hermeneutical* is to call attention to the message itself, which is, when understood, the persuasive power of God, the power of the truth about humanity’s God-given purpose and destiny.

Understanding the biblical message is the prerequisite of persuasion regarding its truth — which is to say that understanding is indispensable to NT Christian faith — in that *one cannot intelligently believe what one does not understand*. While this common-sense assertion should be obvious enough, in the wake of nearly two millennia of ecclesiastical Christianity, it is anything but a truism.

Since the second-century rise of the monarchical bishop, which marked the birth of ecclesiastical hierarchy in the Christian community, Christians have been commanded to believe what they were told by ecclesiastical authority, held to be the earthly extension of the authority of the risen Lord himself. The difference between the authority of the NT Jesus and the ecclesiastical authority that eventually usurped his government of the Christian community, however, is that, during his days in the flesh, Jesus invited, and prodded, his hearers — both his disciples and the multitudes — to understand his words; Jesus’ authority was (and is) the authority of truth, *which rules not over but from within the persuaded heart*. And Jesus’ apostles carried on this tradition of spiritual (as opposed to legal) authority in their proclamation of Jesus’ *gospel of the kingdom* to all nations. By comparison, ecclesiastical Christianity rhetorically invented incomprehensible doctrines (most notably, the Trinity) and demanded belief (or at least the profession of belief) under the threat of excommunication and, sometimes, execution (a threat that was often carried out, as in the notable case of Michael Servetus).

Ecclesiastical Christianity, thus, substituted the legal authority of coercion for the spiritual authority of persuasion, that is, for the inner authority of the conscience informed by faith in the biblical message (which the Bible calls “the word of God”). The concept of *faith* has been reinvented by ecclesiastical Christianity to mean, on one hand, an unquestioning subjection to ecclesiastical authority and, on the other hand, a mystical experience of God in the (third) Person of the Holy Spirit,

who takes possession of those who surrender to ecclesiastical authority, filling their hearts with worshipful feelings. (When one questions an ecclesiastical doctrine, one is considered to be, and typically considers oneself to be, questioning one's *faith in God* and, therefore, can hardly help feeling out of touch with the ecclesiastical Spirit.) Biblical *revelation* (Greek, *apokalypsis*, literally, *unveiling*: the unveiling of what was formerly a mystery) appeals to human understanding — which is to say that *what is beyond understanding has, by biblical definition, not been revealed* (see Deut. 29:29) — whereas ecclesiastical revelation appeals to hierarchical authority and mystical experience. What cannot be understood must, therefore, be “taken on faith,” often defined as a “blind leap” into the arms of “God,” who delivers the soul for safe-keeping into the hands of ecclesiastical authority. This amounts to *persuasion without understanding*, a faith that takes possession of the soul, at least insofar as one's relationship with God is concerned.

The NT faith of Jesus, by comparison, takes the distinct form of a persuasion that depends on understanding. To experience God's *Spirit* (Greek, *pneuma*, and Hebrew, *ruach*, literally, God's *breath*, the biblical metaphor which signifies God's earthly presence, mediated through the revelation of God's word, *breathed* into and through God's OT and NT messengers) is, accordingly, *to understand the biblical message so as to be persuaded of its truth*. In stark contrast to the experience of possession — which relieves “believers” of the responsibility of self-government — Jesus told his disciples, as to their continuing persuasion regarding his message, “If you abide in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

Faith, defined in terms of understanding and persuasion, is the gift of God in that the biblical message — Jesus' gospel of the kingdom, including its testimony to his death and resurrection — *is itself* the gift: Apart from the message, there is nothing to understand, nothing of which to be persuaded, and therefore, no possibility of faith in the apostolic sense: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Faith is a gift, also, in that it can be rejected: unlike the irresistible “third Person of the Godhead” of ecclesiastical Christianity, the spirit/breath of the God and Father of Jesus does not coerce hearers to believe (which would be the case if, in Calvinistic terms, faith is a “gift” that “the elect” cannot help but accept, and correspondingly, that the non-elect cannot help but reject); God's spirit/breath, in the form of the *inspired* (or *in-spirit-ed*) message, persuades hearers who voluntarily open their minds to understand it. Which is to say that NT Christian faith is *a rhetorical and hermeneutical spirit*, one that persuades through understanding rather than possesses through indoctrination, as does the hierarchical/mystical spirit of ecclesiastical Christianity.

The Bible, both OT and NT scriptures, is obviously the primary source of information regarding its own message. Nevertheless, *reading* the biblical text and *understanding* the biblical message are not necessarily the same experience: one can read the Bible and fail to get its message. Perhaps the most significant obstacle to understanding concerns the hermeneutical difference between the original readers of the NT documents and subsequent generations of Bible readers.

The Hermeneutic Circle

The interpretive concept of the *hermeneutic circle* is a useful tool for grasping the difference between how the original recipients of the NT documents read them (or, more precisely, heard them, in that most first-century Christians were probably illiterate) and how they have been read by each subsequent generation of professing Christians. The *hermeneutic circle* reveals what is called *the fore-structure of understanding*: Whenever one hears a message or reads a text, in order to understand it, one must relate it to one's previous experience with, and therefore, one's already existing understanding — called one's *preunderstanding* — of the subject matter in question. Which is to say that one can only understand in light of what one has already understood. This means not that one's understanding cannot be corrected or otherwise changed *but that one's understanding can develop, whether in the same direction or in a divergent — even, perhaps, radically different — direction, only*

by interacting with what one has already understood. At its most basic level, the *hermeneutic circle* reveals the obvious truth that one can only understand what one hears or reads concerning “God” with reference to one’s previous experience with “God.”

Their hearing of the apostolic gospel, then, had radically redefined the *God-experiences* of both first-century Jewish and Gentile believers by confronting their *preunderstandings* — conditioned by various forms of Judaism and Paganism, respectively — with Jesus’ revelation of the kingdom of God (granting that first-century Gentile polytheists had far more redefining to do than their monotheistic Jewish counterparts). As a result, this new knowledge of God, mediated through their faith in Jesus’ gospel, became their new *preunderstanding* for all that they heard and read from the apostles and their associates thereafter. Which is to say that they understood the apostolic documents in the light of — wholly with reference to — Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God.

By comparison, when subsequent generations of professing Christians have read the scriptures, their *preunderstanding* has already been fixed — having presently been lorded over for many centuries — by the traditions of ecclesiastical Christianity, all of which, since the fourth and fifth centuries, have their theological roots in the neo-Platonizing and Gnosticizing Church councils that formulated and authorized ecclesiastical theology. For most of the first 1500 years of ecclesiastical Christianity, the scriptures were the possession of “the clergy” and, by ecclesiastical decree, unavailable to “the laity” (who, for most of that time, were largely illiterate anyway). Even with the invention of the printing press and the onset of the Protestant Reformation, however, the increasingly widespread reading of the scriptures produced understandings that could only result from interactions with the *preunderstanding* already established by ecclesiastical Christianity. (A *preunderstanding* rhetorically invented by the so-called “revelation” of a God-in-three-Persons, who ruled over a paternalistic and hierarchical religious empire by means of a written law, also ostensibly “revealed” in the Bible and, therefore, authorized as “the word of God” and enforced by priestly mediators.) Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God, as foretold by the OT prophets and proclaimed by the NT apostles, had long since been lost as the revealed and, therefore, God-given *preunderstanding* for accurately interpreting and, therefore, understanding the scriptures. The “gospel” which eventually emerged to take its place was (and is) one that was shaped by that ecclesiastical *preunderstanding* and, therefore, that confirmed and upheld it. Today’s “gospel” of evangelical Christianity continues to confirm and uphold the Neo-Platonic and Gnostic presuppositions (including the myths of *the immortal soul* and *the preexistent God-man*) that began to inform the ecclesiastical tradition as early as the second century and became enshrined therein with the Church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries (especially the Council of Nicea in 325 C.E. and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E.).

Integral to the ecclesiastical stranglehold on biblical interpretation is the equation of the Bible with the word of God (see the attached Appendix: The Biblical Word of God). The belief that the Bible — rather than the apostolic gospel about which the Bible is *inspired* to testify — is the word of God has, for all intents and purposes, placed the defining and nurturing of Christian faith in the hands of “the clergy,” the ecclesiastical leaders who have assumed the role of the official interpreters of scripture. When they mount their pulpits to deliver their sermons, rather than acknowledging that they do so to propagate a particular ecclesiastical tradition, they presume to “preach the word of God,” as if they were *inspired* messengers of God. And “the laity,” to the vast majority of whom the Bible appears virtually impenetrable to their understanding, therefore, rely on the clergy to tell them what the Bible means. Which is to say that, in order to “hear the word of God,” the laity depends on the clergy, which identifies God’s word with whatever version of the ecclesiastical tradition that clergy is authorized to transmit. A tradition that for centuries has buried the biblical message under an accumulation of alien dogmas and decrees under the auspices of the Bible itself, thereby presenting those dogmas and decrees as “the word of God.”

In such a rhetorical/hermeneutical context, then, reading the Bible and hearing the word of God can be two radically different experiences. One may read the Bible diligently and yet fail to understand its message, in which case one has failed *to hear the word of God*.

Jesus addressed this very problem with the admonition, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:23; see also Matt. 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9; Luke 8:8; 14:35). One can have “ears to hear” and, therefore, perform the physical act of hearing but fail to “hear” because one fails to perform *the mental act of hearing*, which is understanding. To truly *hear* the word, then, is to *understand*: “As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it” (Matt. 13:23). Paul calls this (in the original language) “the hearing of faith” (Gal. 3:2). Just as, during Jesus’ days in the flesh, one could *hear without hearing*, failing to understand Jesus’ message despite standing in his physical presence, so today, one can *hear without hearing*, by failing to understand the words that one reads in scripture. To read the Bible without getting the message is to miss the point, is to fail to hear the word of God.

For Jesus, as for Paul and the other NT apostles and prophets, as well as their OT predecessors, *faith in God’s word cannot exist apart from understanding* (see Deut. 32:28-29; Psa. 14:2; 32:8-9; Pro. 2:1-15; 28:5; Isa. 29:24; 41:20; Jer. 3:15; 4:22; Dan. 12:10; Hos. 4:14; 14:9; Matt. 13:13-15, 23; Mark 7:14; Luke 24:45; John 8:43; Acts 8:30, 35; Rom. 3:10-11; 1 Cor. 12:3; Eph. 4:18; 5:17; Col. 1:9-10; 2:1-2; 2 Tim. 2:7; 1 John 5:20).

The purpose of spoken language is, of course, to be understood; without understanding, words are merely unintelligible sounds or indecipherable marks: *To attribute power to incomprehensible words is to believe in magic, not truth*. That way leads to possession. However, when the language of truth (whether in spoken or written form) meets understanding, the intended effect is *persuasion*. This is the way an intelligent Creator interacts with his human creation, human beings having been created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27).

Hearing and believing the apostolic gospel, then, is the prerequisite to understanding the scriptures in that the gospel forms *the revealed preunderstanding* for an accurate interpretation of scripture. As Jesus told the Jewish leaders, “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have [*aionion*, literally, *coming-age*] life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). As for his disciples, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he *interpreted* to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. . . ‘that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled’. Then he opened their minds to *understand* the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27, 44-45). The *message* of the Hebrew scriptures was concealed, which is to say that when it was spoken by the prophets and, subsequently, preserved in writing, the word of God fell largely on deaf ears, until “the mystery that was kept secret for long ages” (Rom. 16:25; see also Eph. 3:1-6) was revealed through the proclamation of Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God.

A telltale difference between children and adults is the difference between *authority* and *reason* as respective bases for belief. Children’s beliefs are based on authority: Their ability to reason remaining as yet undeveloped, children believe what they are told by adults. The *preunderstanding* that conditions children’s beliefs is that all-knowing superiors — parents, teachers, and other authority figures — make and speak the rules that control their reality. This, essentially, is the *preunderstanding* of God, employed and imposed by ecclesiastical Christianity, that induces Christian adults to depend on religious experts — the ecclesiastical mediators between “God” and humanity — to tell them what to believe and how to behave. This passive and subordinate mental posture constitutes a refusal to grow up spiritually. Adults, because they possess the God-given faculty of reason, possess the God-given ability, and therefore *responsibility*, to understand their way to faith in the apostolic gospel.

For what is the criterion of persuasion — the means of determining what beliefs are apostolic — if not our own understanding, our ability to reason? Obviously, the alternative is to let someone else decide, some authoritative or charismatic figure who is willing to relieve us of our God-given

responsibility of self-government (the true meaning of freedom), which consists of being “renewed in the spirit of your mind” (Eph. 4:23) by “the truth [that] is in Jesus” (Eph. 4:21); this — the hearing (i.e., *understanding*) and believing (i.e., *being persuaded*) of Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God — is the true leading of God’s spirit (or *breath*), resulting in human behavior being “transformed by the renewing of the mind” (Rom. 12:2). The historical tension between reason and faith is a by-product of the hierarchical/mystical paradigm of Christian faith, which is the rhetorical invention of ecclesiastical Christianity. A renewal of the rhetorical/hermeneutical paradigm of Christian faith dissolves this tension: “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord” (Isa. 1:18).

Not that reason — the Enlightenment doctrine to the contrary notwithstanding — is necessarily opposed to authority or tradition. For authority to be valid, however, it must derive from truth, *which always invites understanding as the means to persuasion*, resulting in a voluntary submission rather than an involuntary subordination (which is the evil fruit of coercion). Tradition must always be subject to question and challenge, that is to say, subject to change when the recovery and discovery of truth requires it. *True spiritual authority exists only in the absence of religious hierarchy*. Jesus submitted the truth of his message, which was rooted in the prophetic tradition of Israel, to the understanding of his hearers, who thus “were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:28-29), for whom the unquestioning observance of “the tradition of the elders” was paramount (Matt. 15:2; Mark 7:3).

While the starting point and continuing reference point of first-century Christians for understanding both the Hebrew scriptures, *retrospectively*, and the apostolic documents, *prospectively*, was Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God, the fact is that twenty-first-century Christians do not begin at the same place. We begin, each to one degree or another (all probably more than we realize), with a *preunderstanding* shaped by ecclesiastical Christianity that works against our best efforts to hear God’s word when we read the scriptures. Nevertheless, making ourselves aware of the pervasive presence of that ecclesiastical *preunderstanding* prepares us to call it into question to whatever degree it is confronted by the biblical testimony about Jesus and the kingdom. In any case, the interpretive task remains formidable.

The (in this case) vicious hermeneutic circle dictates that we must both have heard the apostolic gospel in order to interpret the scriptures accurately *and* interpret the scriptures accurately in order to hear the apostolic gospel. That is, we must accurately interpret both the OT and NT scriptures in order to understand Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom, *and simultaneously*, use our inevitably imperfect understanding of Jesus’ gospel to accurately interpret the scriptures.

Fortunately, we can benefit from the assistance of a growing portion of biblical scholarship, which seems increasingly less inclined to conform to the ecclesiastical status quo: NT scholars continue to make remarkable progress in uncovering the historical origins of Christian faith (though “the wheat” must continually be separated from “the chaff”), so much so that inquiring twenty-first-century Christians can come closer to understanding the socio-cultural and ideological settings of Christian origins than at any time, perhaps, since the first century. Equal in importance, we have one another, with whom to engage in the mutual edification of persuasive discourse regarding the scriptural testimony about Jesus and the kingdom of God. This kind of self-edifying community of faith, all of the members of which are engaged in the process of understanding and persuasion (i.e., of “the hearing of faith,” Gal. 3:2), has, I think, always been God’s alternative to the hierarchically self-perpetuating authority of ecclesiastical tradition.

The Rhetorical/Hermeneutical Purpose of Inspiration

Due to the first-century proliferation of pseudo-gospels (see 2 Cor. 11:1-4 and Gal. 1:6-9) and the eventual apostasy that became ecclesiastical Christianity (see Acts 20:17-35; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 1 John 4:1-6), the NT writers emphasize (far more than has generally been recognized) the *inspiration* of their message: *that the apostolic gospel — the same gospel of the kingdom proclaimed by the historical*

Jesus — is the word of God. Not only the preservation but also the authorization of the apostolic gospel as the word of God — foretold by the OT prophets and confirmed by the apostolic signs that accompanied it — is, accordingly, the primary function of the NT writings, so that Christian faith thereafter might rest, amidst the subversive forces of the ecclesiastical apostasy, on a sure revelatory foundation until the coming of Jesus with the kingdom of God.

If this is the case, one of the most grievous hermeneutical errors Christians make when interpreting the NT writings — with unflinching ecclesiastical approval and support — is to misapply information and instruction regarding the prophetic gift of *inspiration*. Rather than recognizing that the primary purpose of NT references to God’s “Spirit” (that is, God’s *breath*) is to authorize the apostolic gospel in the minds of NT readers, Christians have been led to believe that “the Spirit” works in their lives — and especially in the lives of their ecclesiastical leaders — as the spirit worked in the lives of the *inspired* messengers of the apostolic generation. This misapprehension thus serves to authorize not the apostolic gospel but the ecclesiastical pronouncements of “the clergy” along with the charismatic utterances of “laypersons” as well. And this same pretension to inspiration is at the root of the ecclesiastical dogma that the Holy Spirit was active in leading the Church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries “into all the truth,” and it undergirds the authority of ecclesiastical traditions in general.

When the Jesus of John’s Gospel says that “the Holy Spirit...will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26) and “will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13), the pronouns “you” and “your” apply to none other than his hearers, the apostles, whom he sent “into the world” with his message (John 17:14-18). These words are intended by John’s Gospel to authorize the apostolic message as deriving from the historical Jesus himself, as the revelation of God’s *breath*. In the context of this discourse, Jesus addresses not the reader but his *inspired* messengers, the apostles. Of course, the text itself addresses the reader, but the purpose of John’s Gospel in presenting Jesus’ final discourse is not to inform the reader that she or he will be *inspired* to remember and to testify about and to know “the truth” but *to authorize the apostolic gospel as the inspired message* (that is, the word of God) and, thus, to commend it to the reader’s understanding so as to persuade the reader to believe it and behave accordingly.

Likewise, when the risen Jesus of Acts promises *baptism* “with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5), he has just instructed his apostles “through the Holy Spirit...about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:2, 3) and subsequently tells them that “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), about which the remainder of Acts testifies. Which is to say that the *baptism* with the Holy Spirit as well as “the promise of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:33; see also Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4) and “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38; see also Acts 8:20; 10:45) are all NT references to *inspiration*, the promise of the prophetic gift (see Acts 2:16-18) which is “poured out” at the first Christian Pentecost on the original apostolic community (Acts 2:33), which is baptized (from Greek, *baptizo*, literally, to immerse) with the prophetic spirit and, subsequently, passes it on to others “through the laying on of the apostles’ hands” (Acts 8:18; the exceptional case is that of the first Gentile believers, who receive the prophetic gift in the same way as the apostles, according to Acts 10:47 and 11:15-18).

All of which is to say that Christians who claim to have been *baptized* with the Spirit or to have received the *gift* of the Spirit are (at least in biblical terms) claiming *inspiration* for themselves. While they may, at the same time, disavow any claim to apostolic or prophetic authority, this presumption to the direct operation of the Spirit in their lives tends to have the effect of usurping the authoritative role of the apostolic gospel, replacing the guidance that comes through understanding the message with “divine interventions”: Being “led by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:18) degenerates into a matter of direction via mystical sensations or charismatic utterances. Moreover, in view of the ecclesiastical equation of the Bible with the word of God, any interpretation of scripture becomes, ipso facto, “the word of God,” a revelation of God’s “Spirit.”

Paul's use of pronouns often makes a distinction between his readers ("you") and himself and his *inspired* associates ("we"). For example, when Paul says, God "has shone in *our* hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6), the first-person plural pronoun "our" signifies that Paul's reference is to his and Timothy's (see 2 Cor. 1:1a) *inspiration* to proclaim the gospel: "For what *we* proclaim is not *ourselves*, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as *your* servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5); Paul's use of the pronoun "your" with reference to the Corinthian community of faith (see also 2 Cor. 1:1b-2) clarifies that Paul and Timothy, along with the other first-century *inspired* messengers, viewed themselves as "servants" of, not lords over (unlike the subsequent ecclesiastical rulers of Christendom), those to whom they had proclaimed Jesus' gospel of the kingdom of God.

To point out that NT references to God's "Spirit" are typically references to the first-century *inspiration* of the NT message is not to deny the work of the spirit (God's *breath*) *in the lives of* Christians of subsequent centuries, including our own. It is, rather, to argue that the ongoing work of God's *breath* is not *inspiration* but *persuasion*, that the *breath* of God fills and fuels our lives as we *internalize*, by "the hearing of faith" (Gal. 3:2), and *externalize*, by "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6), the *inspired* (or in-*spirit*-ed) message. Which is to say that *the power of God's spirit works to persuade us*, through our understanding, to believe the gospel and to behave accordingly. The "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-23) comes, then, when "the seed [which] is the word of God" (Luke 8:11; also "the word of the kingdom," Matt. 13:19) is "sown on good soil [which] is the one who hears the word and understands it [who] bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (Matt. 13:23).

The misapplication of the NT references to God's "Spirit" has aided and abetted in the proliferation of pseudo-spirits, of religious superstitions in the name of Christian faith, due to the inability of Christians to "to test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). When "the Spirit" began to be identified with the religious experience of a "Person of the Godhead" rather than with the *inspired* message of God (the understanding and persuasion of which is *itself* the experience of God's presence), Christian faith began, not coincidentally, to turn into ecclesiastical Christianity, an organized religion of authority figures and authority structures which substituted its own ecclesiastical kingdom for the eschatological kingdom of God.

The NT intention of the apostolic and, therefore, *inspired* "we" is to preserve the historical Jesus' gospel of the kingdom, authorizing it as the word of God: "We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:6). None but the apostles of Jesus have ever had the God-given right to speak in these terms.

When the scriptures are used to testify to the apostolic gospel, as Paul says, "the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). On the other hand, when the scriptures are used without reference to the apostolic gospel, to further a religious or political or other agenda (as were the OT scriptures by first-century rabbinical Judaism), "the letter kills" (2 Cor. 3:6; see also 3:7-15). History bears witness to the killing sprees of Christendom: the pogroms inflicted on Pagans and Jews, the crusades against Moslems, the inquisitions and, later, the witch trials directed against Christian "heretics"; and, once having been disarmed and neutered by the Enlightenment, its more subtly coercive imposition of religious guilt and fear on Christian dissenters of all kinds. Such is the evil fruit of ecclesiastical Christianity's enshrinement and employment of the Christian Bible sans the apostolic gospel.

Conclusion

The message of the Bible — Jesus' gospel of the kingdom — begins with the announcement that "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15): *that* the kingdom, in which God will bless all nations with true freedom and equality (that is, with true humanity), is on the horizon, visible to the eyes of

faith in light of Jesus' resurrection. The apostolic gospel reveals, moreover, *that Jesus' resurrection* from the dead provides us with the hope of resurrection from death to life in the coming kingdom of God and *that Jesus' death* on the cross provides us with the assurance of God's love: *that* God the Father is with us and for us in whatever trials we face in this age and will not hold our sins against us at the end of the age, and *that* the day of judgment, therefore, will be the day *not* of our destruction *but* of our salvation. The practical outcome of Jesus' gospel of the kingdom is that the hope provided and assured by the risen "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2) empowers us to love and worship the one true God (rather than Things) and to love and serve one another (rather than things).

That Jesus' gospel of the kingdom *is* the word of God, foretold by the OT prophets, proclaimed by the NT apostles, and preserved in and authorized by the apostolic writings, *is* the rhetorical/hermeneutical truth that the *faith* of Jesus, which reveals the *hope* of the kingdom and the *love* of the Father, is all-sufficient to equip us for life in this age and to prepare us for life in the age to come.

Appendix: The Biblical Word of God

According to both OT and NT scriptures, the word of God is a spoken message rather than a written artifact. Biblical *narrative* testifies to the coming of the word of God to God's *inspired* messengers, who spoke God's word to Israel and the nations; biblical *poetry* expresses the response of God's people to the word of God, which they heard from the prophets; biblical *wisdom* applies the word of God to the individual lives of God's people; biblical *apocalyptic* previews the eschatological future promised by the word of God.

The Bible, by its own account, is *about* the word of God: a prophetic-apostolic *history* of God's word, from God's creation of all things in Adam to God's new creation in Christ. As such, the Bible *preserves* the word of God, *authorizing* the prophetic-apostolic message as the progressive revelation of the one true God, and when properly interpreted, the Bible *explains* the meaning of the word of God; the intended effect of all of these biblical functions is that God's word be spoken and heard anew by each generation.

The biblical account of "the beginning" (Gen. 1:1) portrays God, by the power of his "Spirit" (Gen. 1:2, Hebrew, *ruach*, literally, "breath" or "wind," but typically transliterated "spirit" from the Latin, *spiritus*), as *speaking* the creation into existence (see Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). The "Spirit" (that is, the *breath*) of God is the biblical metaphor for God's earthly presence, which is always a mediated presence, *breathed by God into* and *through* his prophetic spokespersons and, therefore, taking the form, first, of the *inspired* messengers and, second, of the *inspired* message

According to both OT and NT scriptures, when God's "Spirit" came upon persons of his choosing, they characteristically *prophesied*, that is to say, they *spoke the word of God* (see Gen. 41:38; Num. 11:25, 29; 2 Sam. 23:2; 2 Chr. 24:20; Neh. 9:30; Isa. 59:21; 61:1; Eze. 2:2-3, 7; Joel 2:28; Zech. 7:12; Matt. 10:20; 12:18; Luke 4:18; John 3:34; 6:63; 15:26-27; Acts 1:8; 2:17-18; 1 Cor. 2:12-13; 12:3; 2 Cor. 4:13; Eph. 3:4-5; 1 Thes. 5:19-20; 1 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 1:10-12; 1 John 4:1-6; Rev. 19:10). Beginning with Abraham, to whom "the word of *Yahweh* came...in a vision" (Gen. 15:1), the biblical narrative testifies to the coming of God's word, first, *to* the patriarchs of Israel and, subsequently, with the birth of the Israelite nation, *to* Moses and the prophets, whom God thereby *inspired* to speak the word to the people of Israel. With the coming of *God's Anointed*, the word of God "became flesh" (John 1:14) in the person of Jesus, who spoke the word *to* the Jewish remnant of Israel and, *through* his apostles and their prophetic associates, *to* all nations.

To point out that the biblical word of God is a spoken rather than a written word is not to call into question the *inspiration* of scripture (see 2 Tim. 3:16). It is, rather, to bring into focus precisely what the scriptures have been *inspired* to do. The scriptures function as an account of the work of both old-covenant and new-covenant prophets, who spoke the word of God, in the former case, to old-covenant Israel and, in the latter case, to both the Jewish remnant of Israel and to all nations. As such, the scriptures are, collectively, the *inspired* messenger in that they stand in the place of the apostles and prophets. When their message is understood, then, the scriptures *proclaim* (as did the prophets and apostles before them) the word of God. (When, however, the scriptures are understood to *be* the word of God, any message that one presumes to find on any page therein then becomes "the word of God.")

Paul identifies his message, which he calls "my gospel," with the "proclamation of Jesus Christ" (Rom. 16:25a), that is, the gospel of the historical Jesus; further, Paul calls this message, which began with the

historical Jesus and continued with Paul and the other apostles, “the revelation of the mystery” of God’s will (Rom. 16:25b); finally, Paul claims that it is equally the message of “the prophetic writings” (Rom. 16:26a), referring to the Hebrew scriptures and, perhaps, to the then-emergent writings of the Christian apostles and prophets as well. Paul’s claim, then, is that the spoken message of Jesus, his own spoken message, and the message of the scriptures are one and the same message, which “has been made known to all nations, according to the commandment of [literally, ‘the God of the coming age,’ Greek, *aionios*] to bring about the obedience of faith” (Rom. 16:26b).

The “obedience” to which God calls “all nations,” then, is not obedience to the ten commandments or to the scriptures themselves, either OT or NT scriptures or any combination thereof; rather, God calls the nations to “the obedience of faith”: the “commandment” of God is *to believe the message spoken, first, by Jesus and, subsequently, by Paul and the other apostles, and which turns out to be the message which God had been progressively revealing through the prophets throughout the history of old-covenant Israel*. This is the message that the NT Jesus characteristically calls “the gospel of the kingdom of God” and Paul “the gospel of Christ” (Greek, *Christos*, and Hebrew, *Messiah*, the literal meaning of both being *Anointed*, used with reference to prophets, priests and kings, and ultimately, to the promised “Son of Man,” that is, human being, whom God would *anoint*, or choose, to rule God’s kingdom). The “commandment of God,” then, is *to believe the gospel and to behave accordingly* (faithful behavior being the thrust of the practical exhortations and admonitions of the apostolic letters with regard to the life produced by faith in the apostolic gospel). The function, therefore, of “the prophetic writings,” the purpose of their *inspiration*, is to preserve Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God, authorizing it as the word of God and, therefore, to call the nations of every generation to “the obedience of faith.”

Which is to say that, biblically speaking, the word of God is *not* the Bible *but* the gospel. The NT Gospels refer to Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God as “the word of God” or simply “the word” (Greek, *logos*: Matt. 13:19-23; Mark 2:2; 4:14-16, 18-20, 33; 16:20; Luke 1:2; 5:1; 8:11-13, 15, 21; 11:28; John 1:1, 14; 12:48; 14:24; 17:6, 14, 17). Likewise, Acts of the Apostles identifies the apostolic gospel — the message the apostles proclaimed about Jesus and the kingdom of God — as “the word of God” and “the word of the Lord” and “the word” (Acts 4:4, 29, 31; 6:2, 4, 7; 8:4, 14, 25; 10:36, 44; 11:1, 19; 12:24; 13:5, 7, 44, 46, 48-49; 14:25; 15:35-36; 16:6, 32; 17:11, 13; 18:11; 19:10, 20). When Paul “proclaimed...the gospel,” his believing hearers “accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God” (1 Thes. 1:9, 13). Likewise, for Peter, “the living and abiding word of God...is the gospel that was preached to you” (1 Pet. 1:23, 25).

When first-century Christians read (or more precisely, due to widespread first-century illiteracy, heard the reading of) any of the apostolic documents that we know collectively as “the New Testament,” they had already heard the apostolic gospel spoken to them by one or more of the apostles and/or their prophetic associates (called “evangelists,” from Greek, *euangelistes*, which comes from *euangelion*, literally, good news, or gospel; a first-century “evangelist” was, literally, a bearer of good news, a *gospelizer*; see Acts 21:8; Eph. 4:11; 2 Tim. 4:5). As a result of having heard the apostolic gospel, that spoken message had become their reference point for understanding every piece of information or instruction, every exhortation or admonition conveyed to them by the apostolic documents. They knew that the purpose of these documents was to strengthen their faith in Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God by broadening their understanding of its meaning and, thus, deepening their persuasion of its truth. And by broadening their understanding and deepening their persuasion, to motivate them to a life of faithfulness, that is, to a life of acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, specifically, a life of hope in the one true God and of love for one another and others as the gospel reveals that God has loved one and all in his *Anointed*. In sum, Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom of God was the starting point and continuing reference point of the original recipients of the apostolic documents for understanding all that they read therein.

The priority of the apostolic gospel over the apostolic writings clarifies that the central purpose of the apostolic writings is to preserve and authorize the apostolic gospel. By preserving and authorizing the message which the historical Jesus passed on to his apostles, the apostolic writings serve to equip Christians of every generation to engage in both mutual edification and persuasive discourse regarding the apostolic gospel.

Paul promotes this ideal of a self-edifying Christian community that was to remain and flourish after the passing of the apostolic generation of *inspired* messengers of Jesus’ gospel. The *inspired* messengers, whom he identifies as “apostles” and “prophets” and “evangelists” and “pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11), were given by the risen Lord to the community of faith — when he “poured out” (Acts 2:33) God’s *breath* on the apostolic

community at the first Christian Pentecost, in fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (see Joel 2:28-32 and Acts 2:16-21) — for a specific *purpose* and for a specific *period*.

The *purpose* of the *inspired* messengers was to “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). Paul's use of “saints” (Greek, *hagion*, from *hagios*, literally, *holy*, or *sanctified*) as a general description of Christians shows how high was his regard for the work of God in Christ, which amounted to the genesis of a “new humanity, created according to God in righteousness and holiness of truth” (Eph. 4:24). His use of “ministry” (Greek, *diakonias*) for the collective work of “building up the body of Christ,” or edifying the community of faith, exposes the grievous error of ecclesiastical Christianity in its invention of the clergy-laity dichotomy (which occurred with the second-century rise of the monarchical bishop over the local Christian community, the other “elders” becoming the monarchical bishop's “clergy”). The *inspired* messengers functioned, therefore, to spread Jesus' gospel of the kingdom, establishing a local community of faith within each city — which was the work of “evangelists,” such as Philip (see Acts 21:8; 8:4-8) — and to “commit [the gospel] to faithful men who will be competent to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2), which was the work of “pastors and teachers,” such as Timothy and Titus, who committed the *inspired* message to the “elders” of the community: older believers whose faithfulness and maturity enabled them to lead the younger by example and persuasion (see 1 Tim. 3:1-13; 5:1-2, 17-20; Tit. 1:5-9; 2:1-5; 1 Pet. 5:1-5). The *inspired* messengers received the gift of prophecy through the laying on of the hands of the apostles (see Acts 8:14-20; 2 Cor. 12:12; 2 Tim. 1:6), who led the work of spreading the gospel and establishing local Christian communities, assisted by other “prophets,” such as Agabus (see Act 11:27-30; 21:10-11) and the four daughters of Philip (see Acts 21:9).

The period of the *inspired* messengers, according to Paul, was to last “until we all attain unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood,...so that we may no longer be children,...carried about by every wind of doctrine...” (Eph. 4:13, 14). Which is to say that the *inspired* messengers were given by the risen Jesus to lay the spiritual “foundation” of the international Christian community (Eph. 2:20), thereafter to be led in every locality by *mature* believers (i.e., “elders”), who would bring others to maturity in faith (see also 1 Cor. 16:15-18; Phil. 3:12-17; 1 Thes. 5:12-14). The *inspired* messengers, thus, laid the groundwork for a community of faith wherein, “speaking *the truth in love*, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when *each part is working properly*, makes the body grow so that *it builds itself up in love*” (Eph. 4:15-16). The goal of first-century *inspiration*, in other words, was — and remains — a *self-edifying* international Christian community, that is, a community established on the faith of Jesus, able to pass on its faith from generation to generation, having outgrown the need for *inspired* messengers and the signs that accompanied them (see 1 Cor. 13:8-12; see also John 13:34-35; 17:20-23).

Paul apparently entertained both this spiritual ideal of international unity and maturity in the faith *and* the prophetic realization that a great apostasy from the faith was well on its way to wreaking havoc on his apostolic work (see Acts 20:29-30; 2 Thes. 2:7; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; see also 1 John 2:18; 4:1-6). In so doing, he refused to allow the impending darkness to obscure “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” revealed in his gospel (2 Cor. 4:6), and preserved and authorized in his and the other apostles' writings.

By identifying both *the word of God* and *the breath of God* with the *inspired* message of the Bible, that is, with Jesus' gospel of the kingdom of God, rather than with the Bible itself, we allow the Bible to assume its God-given place in the Christian community. Not as a “blueprint” for a religious organization of authority figures and authority structures called “the Church” (a rhetorical invention of ecclesiastical Christianity, linguistically unrelated to the NT Greek, *ekklesia*, literally, “assembly,” used in both a literal sense, with reference to first-century Christian households, and a metaphorical sense, with reference to both the international and local Christian community). Nor as a written “code of conduct” that ecclesiastical law-enforcement officers, called “clergy,” impose on the “laity.” Rather, the Bible fulfills its God-given role of preserving and authorizing the apostolic gospel — Jesus' gospel of the kingdom of God — so that the Christian community can govern itself by “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15), that is, by means of its understanding and persuasion regarding the biblical message.