

The Biblical Concept of Mediation

By Robert Hach

“In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God” (John 1:1).¹

“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24).

The claims of John’s Gospel that “the word was God” and that “God is spirit” began to be interpreted and understood at some point in the post-apostolic era as *ontological* statements. The term *ontology* refers to philosophical discourse about *being*, that is, about what things *are in-and-of-themselves*. According to the *ontological* reading of these texts that has prevailed in ecclesiastical Christianity since the fourth century C.E., the *logos* is “the Word,” which was (in some ostensibly timeless space called “eternity past”) a divine *Person* within the *Being* of God, whose *Being* is composed, in equally *ontological* terms, of the divine *substance* of “spirit.”

An alternative--and, I believe, more apostolic--interpretation results from understanding these claims in terms not of *ontology* but of *mediation*: “the word was God” and “God is spirit” both refer to the *mediation* of God’s *active presence on earth* rather than to an *ontology* of God’s *divine nature in heaven*. This understanding not only makes far plainer sense of each text in context but also serves to highlight the centrality of “the word”--the biblical message about Jesus and the kingdom of God--to Christians’ everyday experience of the active presence of God.

Mediation and Ontology

The assumption that the claims of John’s Gospel about what God *was* (“the word”) and what God *is* (“spirit”) must be *ontological* assertions is rooted in the radical reinterpretation of the New Testament (NT) writings that emerged in the second and third centuries under the influence of *Hellenism*, the Greek culture of the Roman empire of the early Christian Era. *Hellenism* was in large part the flowering of the philosophical seeds planted in the fourth century B.C. by Plato, whose philosophical project was to construct a worldview (or *metaphysics*) that described transcendent and eternal *being*. Platonic philosophy replaced the immortal gods of Greek mythology with eternal *forms*--the divine essences of *being*--which, according to Plato, imperfectly manifested themselves in the temporal shadows of everyday life. At the time of Jesus’ proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God in first-century Judea, the Roman empire was being swept by a resurgence of Platonic philosophy (eventually labeled “neo-Platonism”), which subsequently entered into an unholy union with Christian faith in the form of *ecclesiastical* Christianity (i.e., the Christianity of “the Church” which emerged from the ecclesiastical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries and eventually took the forms of Catholicism and, later, Protestantism.)

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., the Jewish leaders of the first-century Christian community were gradually replaced by a Gentile leadership, whose cultural and educational background reflected an immersion in the neo-Platonic

¹ Throughout this paper, due to the lack of any exegetical basis for capitalization, I render *o logos* as “the word” rather than as “the Word,” as it is typically rendered in John 1:1 and 1:14 by English versions of the New Testament.

philosophy that permeated Greek culture in the early centuries of the Christian Era. As a result, the Christian scriptures were increasingly reinterpreted according to neo-Platonic and, therefore, *ontological*, assumptions. This meant that all NT uses of any form of the verb *to be* (is, was, etc.) with reference to God began to be interpreted *ontologically*, that is, *as literal descriptions of God's Being*.

Insofar as Western thought has continued, to the present day, to reflect its philosophical and political roots in the ancient Greco-Roman world (which itself shaped the post-apostolic development of the Judeo-Christian influence on Western thought), ecclesiastical Christianity continues to propagate the *ontological* assumptions of neo-Platonic philosophy: If “the word *was* God,” and “the word *became* flesh” in the person of Jesus, then Jesus must have been a preexistent *Word-Person* of the Godhead who emerged in human flesh as a *God-man*. And, accordingly, if “God *is* spirit,” then the *Being* of God (whether in the Persons of the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit) must consist of the divine *substance* of “spirit.”

One of the chief differences between the biblical revelation of God and the *ontological* speculations about God of a thoroughly neo-Platonized ecclesiastical Christianity is that, rather than presuming to reveal what God eternally *is*, the biblical message reveals what God *has done* and *is doing* temporally, that is, in time. From the creation of all things “in the beginning”--“the beginning” referring not to *eternal timelessness* but to the event that *began* human time--to the new creation of all things in the kingdom of God, the biblical revelation concerns not God's eternal *being* but God's temporal *doing*.

The biblical revelation of God, therefore, is not a *metaphysical*--that is, literal--description of God's eternal *being*. Instead, the biblical revelation of God consists of *metaphorical* portrayals of God: God is (*like a*) King, Judge, and Father; God is (*like*) love and light and breath (for a metaphor is a comparison not an identification). And these metaphors are derived from God's temporal *doing*, that is, his earthly activity of ruling his people, judging the nations, providing for his children, sacrificing his Son and raising him from the dead, and revealing “the word” (which itself reveals each of the other activities).

What God *is in-and-of-Godself* is beyond human comprehension and, therefore, not subject to revelation: no words exist to reveal God's literal *Being* beyond the fundamental Israelite confession of faith: “*Yahweh* our God, *Yahweh* is one” (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29). Beyond this, any attempt to describe God's *Being* in literal terms can only amount to theological nonsense, such as the incomprehensible inclusion of three Persons within one *Being*, the second Person of which *being* 100% God and 100% man. God only knows how many intelligent people have been led to reject Christian faith due to the ecclesiastical misrepresentation of God as a theological absurdity.

The biblical revelation, instead, describes God in *metaphorical* terms because it is a revelation of God *in-relation-to-us*. We are, of course, familiar with kings and judges and fathers, albeit the prophetic and apostolic emphasis on God's *holiness* distinguishes God from all of his human counterparts. God's sovereignty (as King), justice (as Judge) and providence (as Father) are revealed through God's actions on our behalf. The biblical message reveals what God *has done* to reconcile us to himself for everlasting life in God's kingdom--so that human beings can relate to God through the faith of Jesus, just as Jesus, when he was in the flesh, related to his God and Father. (Which is what makes the authentic humanness of Jesus so indispensable to Christian faith, for only if Jesus was, and is, *not* God can he have served as the perfect model for how a true human being

relates to the one true God, that is, through faith in “the word.”)

When it comes to the biblical revelation of God, then, the question concerns not how we can know what God *is*--which we simply cannot due to the limitations of human flesh--but how we can know what God *has done* and *is doing*. And not only know *about* God’s doing but know God’s active presence in terms of our *personal experience*. The biblical answer to this question is that what God *has done* and *is doing*--God’s *active presence in the world* ever since “the beginning”--is revealed through the *mediation* of “the word.”

Mediation and the Word

The NT claim that “the word *was* God” cannot refer to God’s eternal *Being* because the definition of “eternal” requires that it refer always to what *is*--Plato’s *eternal present*--making tense distinctions between past, present and future meaningless. The expression “eternity past” is a rhetorical invention necessitated, I suspect, by ecclesiastical Christianity’s attempt to merge Platonic philosophy’s *timelessness* (in which there can be no past or future but only a never-beginning-or-ending present) with Christian faith’s *timeliness*, revealing what God *has done* in the past, *is doing* in the present, and *will do* in the future; for Plato, the ecclesiastical phrase “eternity past” would likely have seemed an oxymoron.

The reason that John’s Gospel speaks in the past tense in its claim that “the word *was* God” is that it refers to God’s work of revelation at “the beginning” of creation: “the word” which God began to reveal in creation (and continued to reveal progressively to the patriarchs and the prophets and through the prophets to Israel, but would not fully reveal until “the word became flesh”) was the revelation *of God*: “the word was God.” That is to say, “the word,” which “was *with* God” (John 1:1, that is, in God’s mind) at “the beginning” of creation, “*was* God” thereafter, in that it began to *mediate* God’s active presence on earth as soon as God began speaking the creation into existence (see Gen. 1: 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26).

Throughout John’s Gospel and the rest of the apostolic writings, “the word”--which began as God’s *purpose* for creation and continued as God’s *promise* to Abraham--has become God’s *proclamation* in and through Jesus, in whom “the word became flesh” (John 1:14). Jesus proclaimed the coming fulfillment of God’s *purpose* and *promise* to bless all nations in the kingdom of God. Accordingly, “the word” became *the spoken message of Jesus*, characteristically called “the good news of the kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43) by the synoptic Gospels. God revealed “the word” *to* Jesus (John 3:34) and *through* Jesus to his apostles (John 6:63; 14:25-26; 15:26-27; 16:12-15; 17:8, 14), who, following his death and resurrection (which completed the apostolic message of Jesus and the kingdom), proclaimed “the word” to all nations (John 17:17-21; 20:21-22).

According to the NT writers, then, “the word” is not the Bible itself but the biblical message: Jesus’ good news of the kingdom of God. And the God-given purpose for reading the Bible--fulfilled only for those who “ask” and “seek” and “knock” (Matt. 7:7)-- is to *hear* (i.e., to understand) and *believe* (i.e., to be persuaded of) “the word,” and so *to experience the active presence of God*.

According to the biblical story, Abraham experienced God *through* God’s revelation of “the word” *to* him in the form of the promise; Moses and the prophets experienced God *through* God’s revelation of “the word” about the old-covenant fulfillment of the promise *to* them and *through* them to Israel; and Jesus experienced God *through* God’s revelation of “the word” about the new-covenant fulfillment of the

promise *to* him and *through* him to his apostles, who experienced God *through* the risen Jesus' revelation of "the word" *to* them and *through* them to all nations. This is the biblical account of the progressive revelation of "the word," which the Bible preserves so that each generation can *hear* and *believe* and *speak* "the word" anew, experiencing for itself the active presence of God.

And so, from "the beginning," the knowledge of God--that is, the experience of God's active presence--has always been knowledge of "the word," the patriarchs and the prophets of Israel knowing no other God than the One revealed to them through "the word." And, according to John's Gospel, "the word" which "was God" from "the beginning," *mediating* God's active presence in the world, "became flesh" in the person of Jesus. Which is to say, with Paul, that now Jesus is the "one mediator between God and [humanity]" (1 Tim. 2:5).

When Paul affirms the oneness of God and identifies the "one mediator between God and [humanity]" as "the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5), he does not make a distinction between the *mediation* of "the word" and the *mediation* of Jesus himself, as if Jesus took over the work of mediation from "the word" when he was born. This is, however, a distinction presumed and perpetuated by the *evangelical* branch of *ecclesiastical* Christianity. Evangelicalism teaches, implicitly if not explicitly, that Christians know God in two ways: first, they *know about God* through "the word" (typically misconstrued as the Bible instead of as the biblical message of Jesus and the kingdom of God) and, second, they *know God personally* in Jesus, through the agency of "the Spirit," *Who* (in Trinitarian terms) creates a "personal relationship" between God and the "spiritual" Christian, a religious experience that supposedly goes beyond merely believing "the word."

This notion of a direct and immediate, "personal relationship with God," which pervades evangelical Christian faith, was precisely the message of the second-century Gnostics, who argued that faith in the testimony of others--namely, the apostles--amounted to a second-hand knowledge of God and was clearly inferior to their first-hand *knowledge* (Greek, *gnosis*), which consisted of a *personal*--direct, unmediated--*experience* of God's *Being*.

For Paul and the other apostles, however, "the word" *is* the revelation of God-in-Christ-through-the-Spirit; therefore, knowing God-in-Christ-through-the-Spirit is nothing more nor less than believing "the word." To believe "the word" *is* to have a relationship with God, through the *mediation* of "the word." This is not merely to say that believing "the word" is the prerequisite to knowing God, as if knowing God were *the result of* believing "the word," a religious experience *in addition to* believing "the word." To the contrary, the biblical concept of *mediation* means that believing "the word" and knowing God *are the same experience*. (The prayer of faith is, in effect, a confession to God of one's faith in "the word"; biblical prayer both petitions God to be and thanks God for being faithful to his covenant promises.) God's active presence in our minds and hearts, in our activities and relationships is *mediated* through "the word." (The objection that knowing God *must* mean more than *just believing* "the word" betrays both the continuing grip of the gnostic spirit on contemporary Christian faith *and* the inevitable outcome of the gnostic approach: an impoverished sense of what it means, in NT terms, *to believe* "the word.")

For Paul, "the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5), since his resurrection from the dead, is now the same as "the testimony given at the proper time" (1 Tim. 2:6). In other words, while Jesus' *immediate* presence is "at the right hand of God" in the coming

kingdom, his earthly presence (like the earthly presence of God the Father) is now *mediated* through “the testimony” (i.e., “the word”). For Paul, then, to proclaim “the word” *was to proclaim Jesus* (see 1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2; 15:12; 2 Cor. 4:5; 11:4; Col. 1:28).

Jesus is “the word,” then, not in the sense that “the word” is, or ever was, a Person. Instead, Jesus is “the word,” first, in the sense that God’s word of promise “became flesh” when Jesus came to proclaim the fulfillment of God’s promise in the coming of the kingdom of God, and died and rose from the dead in order to prepare God’s people of all nations for its coming. And Jesus is “the word,” second, in the sense that our experience of the risen and exalted Jesus is *mediated* through “the word”: the biblical message about Jesus and the kingdom of God.

To say that “the word” is Jesus in the same sense that “the word” is God, then, is *not* to say that Jesus is God *but* to say that the active presence of both God the Father and Jesus the Son are *mediated* through “the word.” And so, Jesus prayed for “those who will believe in me through [the apostolic] word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us . . .” (John 17:20-21).

In that the apostolic claim that “the word was God” means that God began to be *mediated* through “the word” in his creation of the world, it also means that God was, in the same sense, *mediated* thereafter through those who spoke “the word”: the prophetic spokespersons *to* and *through* whom God *revealed* “the word.” Therefore, with reference to the judges of Israel, God “called them gods to whom the word of God came” (John 10:35; see also Psa. 82:6). The judges and other prophetic messengers were “gods” in the sense that *they were God’s delegated spokespersons*, authorized to stand in God’s place before God’s people: to hear their message was to hear God’s word; as such, they often began with the words, “Thus says *Yahweh*.”

This is precisely the sense in which Thomas addressed the risen Jesus as “my Lord and my God” (John 20:28): by raising him from the dead, God has shown Jesus to be his preeminently anointed messenger, the one *in* and *through* whom “the word” *mediates* God’s active presence to all nations.

Nevertheless, ecclesiastical Christianity’s infection of the Christian tradition with the theological virus of neo-Platonism has so subverted and obscured the biblical concept of *mediation* that the *mediatorial* understanding of the apostolic claims that “the word was God” and “God is spirit” has been so obscured as to have been, for all intents and purposes, lost. Ecclesiastical Christianity has both redefined “the word” and “the spirit,” and in so doing, relocated--as far as the minds of Christians are concerned--the active presence of God. God’s active presence has been rhetorically transferred from “the word” to religious experiences *mediated* by “another Jesus” than the one “proclaimed” by the apostles, and by “a different spirit” than the one “received” and “a different gospel” than the one “accepted” by the apostles’ first-century hearers (2 Cor. 11:4).

Mediation and the Active Presence of God

According to the biblical revelation of God, God’s earthly presence and activity are not *immediate*, that is, experienced directly, un-separated by time and space. The biblical God inhabits not the present age of sin and death but the coming age of righteousness and life, not the kingdoms of the earth but the kingdom of heaven:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares [*Yahweh*]. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa. 55:8-9)

To say that God inhabits the coming age is to say that God is not *immediately* accessible to the inhabitants of the present age. As inhabitants of this age, our knowledge of God must be *mediated* through “the word” about the coming age--the kingdom of God.

After the appearances of the risen Jesus, he “ascended to the Father” (John 20:17), being “taken up” (Acts 1:2, 11), that is, exalted to “the right hand of God” (Rom. 8:34; see also Heb. 1:3; 1 Pet. 3:22) in the coming kingdom. The biblical language of *ascension to the heavens* and *exaltation to God’s right hand* is kingdom language, metaphorically portraying Jesus’ emergence *out of* the present age of sin and death *into* the coming age of righteousness and life, that is, the resurrection age, the age of the new humanity: Jesus is “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20), “the firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18). *The risen and exalted Jesus is now what we will be.* Just as we have no *immediate* space-time access to God the Father, we have none to the risen Jesus; the active presence of both the Father and the Son are now *mediated* to us through “the word.” Which is to say that as “the word” about Jesus and the kingdom fills our understanding minds and persuaded hearts, we are filled with (“the Spirit,” which is) the *mediated* presence of God the Father and Jesus the Son.

To say that we inhabit the present age while God and the risen Jesus inhabit the age to come is to say that God’s kingdom, wherein Jesus is “seated . . . at his right hand” (Eph. 1:20), *is our future*, the future God has promised us in Jesus’ good news of the kingdom. It is to say that our knowledge of God is *a matter of faith* and, therefore, *a matter of hope*, in that “faith is the reality of things hoped for” (Heb. 11:1). Which is also to say that what we hope for--everlasting life in God’s presence in the coming kingdom--is even now a “reality” of faith *mediated* through “the word.” In other words, the presence of the coming kingdom is *mediated* even now, through Jesus’ good news of the kingdom.

The biblical interventions of God--including the flood, the exodus, the resurrection, and all the other judgments/deliverances of the God of Israel--were all episodes of *the coming age breaking into the present age*. As such, they were revelations of the active presence of God. And these interventions were inseparable from the prophetic and apostolic testimony about them because *God’s interventions were always revelatory*. That is what the Bible is about: the revelatory interventions of God, progressively revealing--intervention by intervention--the Abrahamic promise and its fulfillments of son, nation, land, and finally, international blessing in God’s *Anointed* (Hebrew, *Messiah*; Greek, *Christus*) and the coming kingdom. The prophetic and apostolic interpretations of these miraculous events as God’s revelatory interventions are “the word.”

In Jesus’ good news of the kingdom, *the coming age has now broken permanently into the present age*, God intervening no longer episodically but now continually through the *mediation* of “the word” itself, *in* the unbelieving world and *within* the community of faith. Accordingly, “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await” (Phil. 3:20) the coming of God’s *Anointed* with God’s kingdom. Which is to say that we are, even now, inhabitants of the coming age through the *mediation* of “the word.”

In that we remain inhabitants of this age, we share the space-time separation of the unbelieving world from God; in that we believe “the word,” however, we are also inhabitants of the coming age and, therefore, experience even now the promised fellowship with God that is *mediated* through “the word.” Through faith, we have “tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:5).

A reason to doubt claims regarding miraculous interventions of God since the passing of the apostolic generation is that there are no longer prophetic and apostolic messengers to interpret them as such. If such “inspired” messengers of God were among us today, why wouldn’t their interpretations of God’s supposed current interventions be incorporated into an ever-expanding Christian scriptures? For this is what the scriptures preserve: the testimony of God’s chosen messengers about God’s revelatory interventions for the purpose of fulfilling his Abrahamic promise, their testimony being “the word.”

If, on the other hand, the process of revelation reached finality in the apostolic proclamation of Jesus’ good news of the kingdom of God--which was “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3)--two conclusions seem reasonable: first, God *no longer* intervenes miraculously to reveal “the word”; second, God *now* intervenes through “the word” itself, which *mediates* the active presence of God and his *Anointed* in the unbelieving world and *within* the community of faith.

On one hand, this means that our experience of the active presence of God and his *Anointed*--our knowledge of God--is limited by our faith in “the word”; only as we believe “the word” does God intervene in and through us.

On the other hand, this means that our experience of God’s active presence grows *as grows our faith in “the word.”*

Even though we often struggle with the limitations of our own experience of God’s active presence due to the relative immaturity of our faith in “the word,” God experiences no such limitations; in the words of Paul: “now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God” (Gal. 4:9). In other words, our fellowship with God does not rest exclusively, or even primarily, on *our* faith and, therefore, *our* experience of God, as indispensable as it obviously is to believe “the word.” Rather, our fellowship with God rests primarily on *the faith of Jesus*, through whom *God knows us* intimately, as our “Abba, Father” (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; 4:6). And the faith of Jesus is, of course, his good news of the kingdom, of which our understanding expands and persuasion deepens as we grow in the faith. Which is to say that God knows us fully even as we struggle, for as long as we struggle, to know God through the *mediation* of “the word.”

To say that God inhabits the coming age while we inhabit the present age is, of course, not to refer to God’s literal whereabouts but (like all that the biblical message reveals about God) to refer to *God-in-relation-to-us*: the kingdom of God is our future. The present whereabouts of God’s *Being*--of *God-in-and-of-Godself*--is, like every question about the *Being* of God, beyond the reach of human thought and, therefore, not subject to revelation. In other words, the apostolic claim that we are “known by God” does not depend on our being able to pinpoint the location of God’s *Being*; it depends, rather, on our identifying ourselves with Jesus’ faith in “the word.”

While God’s *Being*--God’s *immediate* presence--is not accessible to human experience, God’s *doing*--God’s *mediated* presence--*is*, nevertheless, accessible to human experience, through the earthly activity of “the word”:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:10-11)

Which is to say that the earthly activity of “the word” is, as it has always been, the earthly activity of God.

Mediation and the Spirit

If “the word was God” means that “the word” began to *mediate* God’s active presence on earth in the creation of all things, “God is spirit” means that God’s active presence has continued to be *mediated* through “the word” ever since.

The greatest obstacle to understanding the biblical concept of *mediation* is ecclesiastical Christianity’s separation of “the spirit” (or “the Spirit”) from “the word,” and its rhetorical transmutation of “the Spirit” from a *metaphorical expression* into a *metaphysical entity*, and of “spirit” into a *metaphysical substance*. Only if “spirit” (or “Spirit”) is understood in *mediatorial* rather than *ontological* terms--and in *metaphorical* rather than *metaphysical* terms--do the biblical function of the term “spirit” and the biblical concept of *mediation* become clear.

The English word “spirit” is derived from the Latin word, *spiritus*, which meant “breath” (or “wind”) as did the Hebrew (*ruach*) and Greek (*pneuma*) terms that are typically translated “spirit” (or “Spirit”) in the Bible. Insofar as God is not a physical being, God does not *breathe* in any literal sense. Therefore, in biblical texts in which the term “spirit” (or “Spirit”) is used with reference to God, it should be understood metaphorically rather than literally and metaphysically. Which is to say that God’s *breath* must represent something other than literal breath.

The rhetorical and literary function of a metaphor is to represent an abstract activity with a familiar concrete object or image of some kind; for example, Jesus’ guidance of his disciples is represented by the “good shepherd” metaphor. Likewise, God’s revelation of “the word” *to* and *through* his biblical messengers is represented by the “spirit” (or *breath*) metaphor. Metaphorically speaking, God *breathed* (inspired, or *in-spirit-ed*) “the word” *into* his messengers, and *through* his messengers *onto* their hearers, and *into* those of their hearers who believed “the word.” Biblical references to “the Spirit” (God’s *breath*) then, are figurative references to a quite literal activity: the revelation of God’s active presence through the *mediation* of “the word.”

In other words, no such divine Person or Thing as “the Spirit” exists in literal terms (just as no “shepherd” claiming to be God’s *Anointed* existed in literal terms, the historical Jesus having been a carpenter and a rabbi). Rather, “the Spirit” (God’s *breath*) is the *metaphorical expression* and God’s earthly activity *mediated* through “the word” (the biblical message of Jesus and the kingdom) is the *literal activity* that the metaphor of “the Spirit” represents.

Which is to say that “the word,” as the *mediator* of God’s active presence *in* the world and *within* his people, is (*like*) God’s *breath*: *as if* God were *breathing upon* the world whenever “the word” is spoken and *into* his people whenever “the word” is heard and believed.

The *ontological* turn of post-apostolic Christianity led to the redefinition not only of “the word”: from the biblical message of Jesus and the kingdom as the *mediator* of God’s active presence, to the Bible as a book of inspired information about God’s *Being*. It led also to the redefinition of “spirit” and “the Spirit”: from a *metaphorical expression* of God’s active presence through the mediation of “the word” to, in the case of “spirit,” the *metaphysical substance* of God’s invisible and eternal *being*, and in the case of “the Spirit,” to a *metaphysical entity*, namely, the third Person of the Trinity.

The effect of this *substantiation* of “spirit” and *personalization* of “the Spirit” was

the subversion of the biblical concept of *mediation*. Only when recognized as a figure of speech do the *metaphysical substance* of “spirit” and the *metaphysical entity* of “the Spirit” dissolve into the *metaphorical activity* of God’s *breath*, which is, literally speaking, the work of “the word” in *mediating* God’s active presence on earth.

“God is spirit,” then, in the sense that God’s active presence, *mediated* through “the word,” is *breathed into*--that is, *revealed to*-- and *through* his biblical messengers, the greatest of all being Jesus, who says of himself, “For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure” (John 3:34), and “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). Throughout the biblical writings, “the spirit” (or “Spirit”) of God and “the word” of God are as integrally and inseparably related as the human breath and the words to which it gives voice.

To “worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24), then, is to be filled with the active presence of God *through* the *mediation* of “the word.” For “your word is truth” (John 17:17), having been revealed by “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 15:26). The power of “the word” and the power of “the spirit” are identical in that “the gospel is . . . the power of God for salvation to everyone who *believes*” (Rom. 1:16), and Christians are “strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through *faith*” (Eph. 3:16-17).

In that “the spirit” represents the revelation of the active presence of God through the *mediation* of “the word,” then, “God is spirit.” To equate “the word” with the Bible is, metaphorically speaking, to imprison “the spirit” within its pages, that is, to confine God’s active presence on earth to the revelatory events recorded in the Bible, as if God no longer intervened in the world and in the lives of his people.

However, if “the word” is not the Bible but the biblical message of Jesus and the kingdom, God’s active presence is *mediated*--and, therefore, God intervenes--whenever, wherever, and by whomever the message is spoken, and *within* whomever the message is believed.

Which is to say that the metaphor of “the spirit” represents not only the *revelatory activity* of “the word” *to* and *through* God’s biblical messengers during the period of old-covenant and new-covenant revelation. The biblical metaphor of “the spirit” also represents the ongoing *persuasive activity* of “the word.” This means that “the word” itself is God’s power to persuade unbelievers to believe “the word” and to persuade believers to behave according to “the word” they believe.

From the beginning, *the purpose of revelation has been persuasion* in that God has always willed “all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4), “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach [a change of mind]” (2 Pet. 3:9). (The literal meaning of the Greek, *metanoia*, typically rendered “repentance” by English versions of the Bible, is *a change of mind*, which is the effect on unbelievers of being persuaded by “the word.”)

Mediation and Persuasion

If “the spirit” (or *breath*) of God is a biblical *metaphor* representing “the word” about Jesus and the kingdom of God and its *mediation* of the active presence of God, then God’s active presence in the world is clearly a *persuasive* rather than a *possessive* presence, for “the word” is a *persuasive* rather than a *possessive* power.

Ecclesiastical Christianity subverted the persuasive power of “the word” by redefining “the word” as the Bible, which it then reinterpreted as a book of religious law that authorized “the Church” (i.e., ecclesiastical authority figures) to take possession of

the Christian community, coercively imposing its statutes and dictums on its members.

Moreover, by redefining “spirit” as the metaphysical *substance* of God’s *being*, ecclesiastical Christianity was able to join in the universal rhetorical appeal of all human religions to the human desire for *mystical* oneness with God’s *Being*, to experience the direct and immediate “possession” of the Divinity by merging with God’s *substance*. (This notion of mystical oneness with God has become the popular meaning of “faith” and “spirituality” in the religious world of the present day.)

Being “led by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:18) eventually came to mean being possessed by an invisible and inaudible *Entity*, wholly apart from one’s understanding. The Spirit, as the third Person of the Godhead, became the agent of “the Church,” leading the possessed to feel the immediacy of the divine presence in their observance of the rituals of “worship” conducted by their ecclesiastical rulers.

In NT terms, however, being “led by the Spirit” is metaphorical language for “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6), for experiencing the persuasive power of “the word” to love oneself and others as God has loved one and all in his *Anointed*. For being mobilized by one’s understanding of “the truth” of Jesus’ good news of the kingdom, which “will set you free” (John 8:32) from the possessive powers of sin, law and death.

The challenge remains for contemporary Christians to grasp the biblical concept of *mediation*, the belief that the presence and activity of God in human life *is* the persuasive power of “the word” about Jesus and the kingdom:

That Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom is *God’s power to persuade us* that “the kingdom is at hand,” on the horizon, visible to the eyes of faith, coming in judgment, to bring the present age of sin and death to a close.

That Jesus’ crucifixion for sins is *God’s power to persuade us* that he loves us, so that we can love ourselves and others as God has loved us, and face God’s promised future with the assurance in God’s forgiveness that the coming day of judgment will be the day not of our destruction but of our salvation.

That Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is *God’s power to persuade us* that death has been defeated and that God will raise us, just as God raised Jesus, from death to everlasting life in his coming kingdom.

That Jesus’ exaltation to lordship is *God’s power to persuade us* that no earthly kingdom is worthy of our allegiance and subservience and that we are, even now as we await its coming, citizens of the kingdom of God.

(For further exploration, read my book, *Possession and Persuasion: The Rhetoric of Christian Faith*, and visit my website, **Reflections of a Generic Christian**, at www.ereflections.org.)