

The Word as Sacrament

By Ben Witherington

Traditionally, Protestants have recognized only two sacraments—baptism and the Lord’s Supper. There has been some debate about this amongst the more high church Protestants, but basically the position has been the same throughout recent church history. What is interesting about this view is that it overlooks the Protestant theology of and about the Word of God. While ‘de jure’ baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the Protestant sacraments, ‘de facto’ there has always been another one, and in fact one that has been seen and believed to have a far more regular and enduring effect—namely the Word of God.

The term sacramentum in the Latin has had various definitions over the ages of church history but perhaps the most familiar one is ‘an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace’ or more simply, a means of grace. If a sacrament is a means of grace, by which is meant a means of divine influence and change in a person’s life, then surely the Word of God and its proclamation, reading, hearing learning, memorizing is a sacrament. We just don’t tend to call it that. Consider however what is said about the Word of God in the NT at various junctures. The Word of God is seen as something living which dwells richly in the believer once received, probing and changing the person inwardly.

For example, Paul referring to his preaching of the Good News in Thessalonike in one of his earliest letters says this—“And we constantly thank God because when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as it actually is—the Word of God which is at work in you who believe.”(1 Thess. 2.13). Paul is not talking about consuming communion wafers or getting wet, but he is talking about a means of grace that is at work in a person’s life.

Or consider the famous passage in Heb. 4.12—“for the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any two-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing life breath and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” What is especially interesting about this passage is once again we are referring to oral proclamation of the Word and its reception into the inner life of the person, and notice that what is said about the Word here could just as easily be said about the role of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life (cf. e.g. what is said about the spirit in Jn. 14-17 or 1 Cor. 1-4 and elsewhere).

So much is the Word of God seen as a living and active thing in the NT, that Luke can actually speak about the ‘Word of God’ growing or increasing (Acts 6.7; 12.24) by which was meant it affected and infected many people and the church grew. Christians are exhorted in Col. 3.16 to ‘let the Word of God dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another’. In 1 Tim. 4.5 speaks of the consecration or sanctification of all things including food by means of the Word of God and prayer.

Much more could be said along these lines, but this is sufficient to establish that the Word of God is not only seen as a living thing, its proclamation is seen as something that changes things, including people, indwells them and saves, sanctifies, and illumines them. This surely makes the Word of God and its proclamation and reception a sacrament on any normal understanding of the term.

This in turn brings me to a crucial point. At least in the Protestant Church we partake of the sacrament of the Word at greater length and far more often, than we do the other sacraments. It is far more influential and provides a far more lasting effect on the congregation simply because of the frequency of encounter with the Word, and its inward appropriation. If we are thinking pastorally about our flocks one of the things that we need to ask is—What is doing them the most good, including sacramentally, on an ongoing basis, as a means of grace? Here again the answer must be that de facto it is the Word of God.

I do not say this because I think we should neglect the other sacraments. I say this because we actually need a more sanctified view of the Word of God. The Word of God, when faithfully preached and openly received is far more than just preaching, or a good life lesson, or an edifying discourse. It is the unleashing of God's transformative power in the human life. In short—the Word does things to the recipient that the recipient might well be unaware of at the time, much like taking a medicine the effects of which take time to be noticeable. There is of course a corollary to this—the less one consumes the Word, the less grace, the less spiritual health, one is likely to have. In an age of Biblical illiteracy even within the church, it is no wonder that the church is sickly and open to all sorts of false teaching and its bad spiritual effects.

And there is more good news. Ever since Tyndale, the Word of God has been available to all and sundry English-speaking persons. The Gutenberg revolution prevented it from simply remaining something chained to a pulpit. The Word of God can be self-administered as a sacrament, or it can be received from others. It is not something that can or should be controlled by clergy, dispensing it out as they deem appropriate. No, the Word of God has been unleashed from clerical control, and there is no turning back now.

This brings me to a crucial point. Every Christian needs a more sacramental, and sanctified life than they currently have, even if you are in a church that downplays the traditional sacraments. There is one thing you can do about that every day—add more Word to your diet! I promise it will be beneficial in many ways. Unlike Special K, Special W (the Word), really is special.

(Ben Witherington III is a renowned New Testament scholar. He currently teaches at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.)