



Volume 49 | Issue 2

Article 20

2006

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Recommended Citation

Delivuk, John Allen (2006) "Reading, Writing and Power," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 49 : Iss. 2 , Article 20.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol49/iss2/20>

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Reading, Writing and Power

The word has power

Jer. 23:29 – “Is not My word like fire?” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer which shatters a rock?”

Isa. 55:10-11 – For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and returns not thither, but waters the earth, and makes it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goes forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

Language communicates thoughts to the mind. While words stimulate thought and influence thinking, they operate beyond the intellectual level. In addition to conveying information, they may serve to arouse, channel or subdue passions. Poetic and musical language may open a window in which the emotion and imagination have full play. Language can guide or destroy character, and direct the actions of men. In United States history, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* had a great influence in motivating the colonies to declare independence. Later, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became a major cause of the Civil War. The writings of Karl Marx were a powerful force in determining the history of the twentieth century.

In the context of marriage and other accepted conventions, the speaking of words may perform certain actions. To say “I do” is to become married. In cases like this, words do as well as say.

Words also bring individuals into relationship with communities. They provide persons with the wisdom of the past. They enable us to transcend time and geography and access the knowledge of communities widely separated. By means of everyday talk, the individual

develops his character and world view in relation to the community in which he lives. This leads to the debated question, on what basis does the word have the power to effect these things?

The relationship between the word and its power

What is the source of power? Does power come from the word or from God? The best answer comes from the usual way in which God works. God can, and on infrequent occasions does, work supernaturally through miracles. Most often, he works through the power He gives to secondary causes. For example, the secondary cause of physicians cures more persons than miracles. The usual way people come to faith in Jesus Christ is, “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” God, like men, uses words as His usual means of communication. Perhaps the best proof is that Jesus wrote no Gospels, but instead used the secondary means of men writing to record His words. He used the author’s personality, imagination, style, education, experience and cultural conditioning in their writing.

The writer and his word

“And the word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The Gospel of John begins by talking about the word as a person. The conclusion is that an author and his word have a close identification, and that authors communicate as people. Obviously, a perfect God will produce a perfect Scripture. Obviously, a fallible human, unaided by divine inspiration, will usually produce writing with errors in it. Since we are the image of God, we have the attribute of understandable communication. Some communications will be more accurate, as the carefully researched and written article. Other communications,

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ABSTRACT:

This article’s goal is to discuss the relationship between reading, writing and power. (Unfortunately, space forbids more than an introduction to this topic.) We live in a postmodern society where some people doubt whether truth is knowable. I will show that the power of the written word is great enough so that receptive readers can overcome the barriers against understanding it as the author meant it, and therefore reading can teach the truth. Obviously, this statement will be qualified at a later point. While this article will center on power, it is inseparable from the other traits of literature. The biblical term “Word” often means both the written and the spoken word. Much, if not all, I say will apply to the word spoken as well as the word written. I will begin by listing a few biblical texts that show the relationship between the Word and power.

such as a careless e-mail, will not have the same accuracy. In addition, we notice that different persons having different talents and different backgrounds will produce different writings. For example, I write in my native language, English. Trained in theology and library science, I write articles integrating the two disciplines. When an author writes, she communicates herself as part of her message.

The word is understandable

Post modernism argues against the possibility of understanding the author. The postmodernist position denies the efficacy of the word, by pushing relativism to its extreme and arguing that nothing of the author's true intention or anything connected with objective reality can be assigned to the text. The result is that the reviewer, and/or his community, makes meaning. To a limited extent, the Bible agrees. When a fallible human writes, her communication is usually fallible. The extent of the communication failure will vary greatly depending the skills, backgrounds, and openness of the author and reader involved.

In an excellent article, Ken Stevenson displayed an important chart. He shows God is a common source with respect to the author and reader, both of whom are God's image. He is also the creator of language and logic. Stevenson shows an important commonality between the author, her communication tools, and her audience that makes understanding possible.² In the Bible, we have the apostle Paul using this commonality as a tool for teaching something new, the Gospel. Paul, in his address at Athens, begins by talking about an altar to an unknown God and later quotes from a poet that the Athenians knew. By moving from the known, to the new, Paul was able to make the audience intellectually understand the resurrection of the body, and that understanding led to the heart felt belief of some (Acts 19:22-34).

How do power and truth work together?

Power and truth work together in three steps; knowledge, assent, and full assurance. Let us use smoking as an example. Gradually scientists learned that smoking was a health hazard. Powered by scientific research, they spread the word. As the evidence mounted, more and more people mentally believed the report. It was not until after the Surgeon General's Report on the hazards of smoking in 1964 that many gave their full commitment and attempted to quit smoking. This knowledge/obedience distinction is found in Proverbs 7. The father clearly expects the son to not only know and agree concerning the danger from the adulteress, but to obey the wisdom and avoid her.³

The definition of power

We will now move to the biblical definition of power. *Dunamai* is from the Greek stem having the basic meaning of "being able," or a "capacity" in the sense of an ability. In the Old Testament power usually translates the Hebrew word *chail*. This Hebrew word has the same meaning as the Greek word, in other words "ability," "power," and "confidence." Note that power and ability come together in both Greek and Hebrew words. Power assumes ability. To the Greeks, power was primarily an impersonal force and the individual gods became the users of the universal force. Persons who see nature as a powerful but impersonal force share this view. In contrast, the Hebrews saw God as the creator and preserver of the world who creates and upholds it by His word, which serves as the expression of His will, and the instrument of His power.⁴ Hence, the Bible teaches:

In place of the neutral idea of God, we have the personal God. In place of the neutral forces of nature, we have the power and might of the personal God, which do not operate in terms of immanent law but which rather carry out the will of God according to His direction. This difference, based upon the whole conception of God, is plainly expressed in the concept of power.⁵

Men possess creative and communicative power because they are in God's image, hence, they must write.

Let us look at the raising of Lazarus (John 11). Jesus deliberately waits until four days after the death of Lazarus to visit his family. Martha confronts him by saying that if you have been here; my brother would not have died. Jesus answers by saying, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" Jesus shows his love by weeping as part of the grief process. In contrast to the seemingly impersonal hurricane that blows into town and blows out, Jesus comes into town to minister and share in the grief of the mourners. He shows that He loves them in this life and the next by how he raises Lazarus from the dead. Desiring that all know the resurrection, He prays, then cries out, "Lazarus, come forth." Thus, Christ's power is that of a personal, loving God that works through His powerful word, and the word is the window that shows us a loving God.

God's word power versus magic

In the story of the plagues in Egypt, the power of the prophet Moses competes with the power of the Egyptian magic (Ex. 7-9). Moses declares God's word concerning the plagues, and the plagues occur. The Egyptian magicians change water to blood, and produce frogs. However, they cannot produce gnats, and are incapacitated by the plague of boils. Indeed, after failing to produce gnats, they warn Pharaoh saying, "This is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:18-19).

One difference between magic and the word is the difference between prayer and magical formulas. Prayer is a request to God based upon His promises. Magic attempts to manipulate creation or God by using words as magical formulas. A few examples include using a phrase as a "magical formula" to appease God. "Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust not in lying words, saying, 'The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these.'

You must thoroughly amend your ways and your doings" (Jer. 7:3-5). We find a modern attempt to reduce Christianity to magic in the "name it and claim it" school of prayer, which assumes that God will answer every prayer. This school forgets that a loving Father gives his children what is best for them, not what they want. Outside the churches, we see attempts to use magic in advertising and propaganda.

In Acts 19:13-17, there is another magic formula example. Some Jewish exorcists called "over them which had evil spirits the name of the LORD Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches. ... And the evil spirit answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you? And the man in whom the evil spirit was leapt on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded." The demons would not listen to the divine name blasphemously used as a magic word. The word was without power because the relationship to Jesus Christ was lacking.

"The miracles are evoked by the powerful Word of Jesus, which has nothing to do with magic." On the contrary, Jesus provokes demons to use the defense of magic against him, which He overcomes, with His word of power. "In His words He speaks 'from the mouth of omnipotence,' and thus overcomes the kingdom of demonic powers ruling in sickness, sin and death." The New Testament view is that the miracles of Jesus are part of the invading kingdom of God, which Jesus brings in His own person by word and act. The miracles are the dominion of God defeating the sway of demons and Satan.⁶

The suppression of the word

As was mentioned, people have the power to suppress the word. We see this by the unbelieving reaction to the miracles of Jesus Christ. The miracles depend on the faith of both the performer and the faith of the one on whom they are performed, thus, presupposing

a relationship. Jesus was unable to do miracles in Nazareth because faith was lacking (Mt. 13:15 and par.). The disciples were unable to heal a boy because they did not have faith (Mk. 9:14 ff.). Hence, there is no magic.

It is not the knowledge of magic media and formulae, but the personal relationship between God and Jesus on the one side and Jesus and men on the other side, which works the miracle with no magical compulsion. In faith, all things are possible and therefore there is all power: ... In this faith the believer shares in the rule of God and therefore, either actively or passively, experiences miraculous power. Here we have the uniqueness of NT miracles.⁷

Men can suppress the truth, as Paul observes, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). There are many examples of suppressing truth, such as Pharaoh rejecting the evidence of God’s word as shown in the first nine plagues, the rejection of Amos’ message (Amos 7:10-17), the plot to murder Jeremiah (Jer. 26:7-15), and the stoning of Paul in Lystra (Acts 14:19).

The passion for the word

Another aspect of the relationship between the word and mankind is how the word internally effects its writer. Many authors have a deep and abiding passion for writing. I will illustrate by Jeremiah, whose relationship with God's word sometimes reminds us of the suffering of Job. In the first chapter of Jeremiah, God calls him to be a prophet. He has the unpopular job of declaring God's judgment against all the cities of Judah and against the wicked for their idolatry. He is told that the people will not listen, but instead, “fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you; for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you” (Jer. 1:19). The word comes to Jeremiah, not in the form of the written Law, but instead as an interior word, that will burn from his lips. Since the word comes from God, and burns within him, he becomes as the embodiment of the Word of

the LORD in his declarations. When he speaks about God’s word, he speaks not primarily in the sense of knowledge, although he lays great stress on it. He is thinking first of the word's dynamic content which he feels so strongly in his constant wrestling with God.

In chapter 15 Jeremiah expresses the wrenching extreme to which the word has led him.

“Woe is me, my mother, that you have bore me as a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth! I have neither lent on usury, nor have been lend to on usury; yet every one of them curses me. O LORD, you know: remember me, and visit me, and revenge me of my persecutors; take me not away in your long-suffering: know that for your sake I have suffered rebuke. Your words were found, and I did eat them; and your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart: for I am called by your name, oh LORD God of hosts” (15:11, 15-16).

For Jeremiah, the prophetic burden of the word is his greatest joy and greatest heartache.

After a “typical” day, in which the governor of God’s house assaulted Jeremiah and put him in the stocks for a day, he expressed the price of declaring God's word, “O LORD, you have deceived me, and I was deceived: you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed: I am in derision daily, everyone mocks me. For since I spoke, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of the Lord was made a reproach to me, and a derision daily. Than I said, I would not make mention of him, nor speak anymore in his name. But His word was in my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stop” (Jer. 20:7-9) He continues in verse 14, “Cursed the day that I was born: let not the day on which my mother bore me be blessed,” and verse 18, “Why did I come forth out of the womb? To see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?” The same word that causes his suffering is a burning fire in his bones. He cannot contain the fire of the Holy Spirit. It is a burning brand tossed into his soul. “Never has the constraint of preaching the Word found more

poignant utterance. Never has the martyrdom of the prophet been more keenly felt. He has to preach the Word for his own soul's salvation. 'It is his supreme burden and joy to be a prophet of the Word'"⁸ Clearly, there is a divine imperative at work in the prophet that the normal writer does not feel. While normal writers are not seized and broken by the word as Jeremiah was, they are filled with a passion to speak.

God's use of the written word applies to human literature, although in an imperfect way. Men possess creative and communicative power because they are in God's image, hence, they must write. The words they write can be true or false, objective or emotional, easy or difficult to understand, provoking to passivity or to action. The reader also plays a role. He can decide to accept or suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18, 25), accept or suppress lies, take a message to heart, or politely not listen.

Summary

I would like to state the following propositions derived from the above information.

1. The written and spoken word possesses power; sometimes that power is great enough to change the course of history and cultures.
2. The power comes initially from the human or divine author. The word becomes a secondary cause with its own power. Men cannot completely control their word's power, thus misunderstandings and unintended consequences occur, but God can and does control His word. The use of a personal form of power, namely words, show the personal nature of God's power and man's power.
3. Persons use the word to communicate with other persons. Since God not only created mankind in His image, but also created language and logic, a commonality exists making understanding possible between person and person, and man and God in Christ Jesus.
4. The word can invoke some or all of the following: knowledge, assent, or conviction.
5. Audiences have power to accept the author's word, to reject it, or to select what parts of his word they will accept.
6. The word spreads and maintains cultures, by recording and spreading their knowledge. It can serve as a window for the reader into different cultures, times, and ideas. †

REFERENCES:

¹ Anthony Thiselton takes a different position arguing that have words power because of God and social habits in the community. See A. C. Thiselton, "On Language and Meaning in Religion," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 3:1123-43

² Ken Stevenson, "Reforming Music Theory: God's Voice and Balaam's Ass," *Christian Scholars Review* (35:2, Winter 2006), p. 235.

³ Space limits me to one quotation on this subject. "The Holy Ghost by means of this word works powerfully, so changing and reforming a man, that he finds himself transformed and renewed thereby. 1. It overmasters the soul. 2. It separates the heart from lusts, and the world. 3. Alters and changes the customs of men. 4. It keeps the heart up under the guilt of sins, against all power of the devil. It quickeneth the dull, Ps. 119:93, 107; comforts the feeble, Rom. 15:4; giveth light to the simple, Ps. 119:7; convinceth the obstinate, 1 Cor. 12:3; 14:24; reproveth errors, rebuketh vices, 2 Tim. 3:16; is a discover of thoughts, 1 Cor. 14:24-25; and aweth the conscience, James 4:12." Edward Leigh quoted in Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 2:338-9

⁴ Walther Grundmann, "*dunamai, dunatos*" in Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 2:287-88, 293.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:290.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:302.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:302-03.