

# ANAKAINOSIS

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### ✓ Theses on "Word of God"

by Al Wolters

1. For the purposes of this discussion, the uses of the phrase "Word of God" (and its equivalents) in Scripture can be broadly divided into three classes:

a) "Word" (**dabar, logos, rhema**) = message from God in understandable language. This is by far the most common use.

b) "Word" (**dabar, logos, rhema**) = that by which something in creation is originated, sustained, or governed. There are about half a dozen passages where this use is found. The fiats of God in Genesis 1 also belong here.

c) "Word" (**logos**) = Christ as the divine Son of God. This use is found in two Johannine passages (John 1 and Rev. 19:13).

For convenience, I shall refer to these three uses as "semantic," "cosmological" and "personal" Word.

2. There are good grounds for the claim that the cosmological word does not refer to creation properly speaking (i.e. creatio ex nihilo). This applies also to the "Let there be's" of Gen. 1.

3. The New Testament teaches in many places that God created all things "through" (**dia** + genitive) or "in" (**en**) Christ. Since John explicitly links this teaching with the personal Word (John 1:1-3), it is almost irresistible for the systematic mind not to combine this given with the cosmological use of "word" elsewhere.

4. This has in fact been done since the early Church Fathers, who took the further step of continuing these givens with the Stoic notion of a world Logos, the Platonic one of an archetypal "idea," and the Aristotelian one of an immanent "form." We find this amalgam, for example, in Augustine, Aquinas and Bavinck. It is known as "Logos-speculation."

5. There are sound objections not only to the second step, but also to the first. If the references to a cosmological word are taken as referring to the doctrine of creation-through-Christ, then a number of problems arise:

a) The occurrence of the cosmological word must be pressed to refer to creation. This is unlikely in most cases, impossible in some (see 2 above).

b) If the cosmological word is taken to refer to creation, then we have creation both by the cosmological word and creation by the personal Word. Accordingly, the two have traditionally been identified, which raises the following problems:

- i) it contradicts Heb. 1:1-3 which explicitly distinguishes the Son as creation "mediator" from the cosmological word.
- ii) it identifies the cosmological word ("law," "structure for," "transcendental condition," Platonic "ideas") with a person of the Godhead, i.e. makes it divine.
- iii) it makes Christ the incarnation of the cosmological word, which seems religiously repugnant.

6. Moreover, the identification of the cosmological word with "idea," "law," "structure for," "transcendental conditions," etc. meets with the following objections:

a) "word" loses its lingual meaning (cf. Frame).

b) "word" loses the **hic et nunc** character which it has in most occurrences. In most cases, the cosmological word is particular, not universal or universally valid.

c) "word" becomes ontologically constitutive, whereas in the Scriptures it is (usually) said to be addressed to already existing creatures.

7. The objections formulated in 5 and 6 above are secondary. A more basic objection is that in both cases **the nature of Biblical language is misconceived.**

8. By "ordinary language" I mean here non-technical language, leaving room for a wide variety of stylised genres and levels of speech. "Non-technical" means that these words are not scientific terms, with a fixed conceptual content, but semantic entities, which have all the variability, context-boundness, connotational overtones, metaphorical obliqueness and idiomatic irrationality (**sit venia verbo**) native to semantic reality. Not to appreciate this difference is the chief fault of doctrinalism, with its concern for propositions.

9. The use of the cosmological word in the Scriptures must be

taken as the naive, imaginative language of faith, describing the **magnalia Dei** in His providential shaping, sustaining and ruling of His creatures. It is fundamentally on a par with all other (anthropomorphic) "God-talk" in the Scriptures: e.g. the references to God's hands, arm, eyes, voice, mind, decisions, strength.

10. To read the cosmological word as explicating the New Testament doctrine of creation-through-Christ is a species of doctrinalism, fitting scattered proof-texts (taken out of context) into a theological jigsaw puzzle. That God created all things through Christ is fundamental to the Christian religion, for it links creation and salvation in a way which undergirds everything. That the message of salvation (and therefore Scripture) is consistently fundamentally creation-oriented is also basic. But to express this (what I would be prepared to call the heart of the Christian religion) in terms of "the unity of the Word" is misleading and exegetically unsound. In a doctrinalistic way it combines a half-dozen instances of cosmological word and the two Johannine Logos passages with the theological tradition of speaking of Scripture as the "Word of God," while negating the most common use of the phrase in the Bible.

11. If ontology deals with the basic categorial distinctions, then a biblical ontology will start with the basic scheme: God, creation, and their relation. There is no technical biblical term for that relation; "covenant" can be stretched to serve. "Word" and "Law" (not the same thing) are part of that covenant relationship; it also includes general revelation, common grace, creation and providence and a good deal more (Cf. Smit's notion of "first history").

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