

THE POWER OF THE WORD OF GOD: LUTHER AND
PENTECOSTALISM IN DIALOGUE

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Introduction

In 1521, at the Diet of Worms, Martin Luther (1483–1546) famously took his stand on his conscience, bound as it is was to the Word of God. To do otherwise was neither right nor secure, he argued. The Word of God was the firm ground underneath Luther and his Reformation. So it has been, as well, for all those varieties of Protestants who have followed in his wake, including those Protestants called Pentecostals.¹ This chapter looks to develop a Pentecostal theology of the Word of God that might come out of dialogue with Luther. It thus has two aims: (1) to draw on the strengths of Luther's bold presentation of the power of God's Word to help Pentecostals hear the Word with great faith, while critiquing along the way a certain kind of Pentecostal theology; and (2) to encourage Lutherans (at least, those who are not already charismatic) to be willing to hear the Word of God in the gifts of the Holy Spirit: the interpretation of tongues, prophecy, words of wisdom and so on.

The article is broken down into three parts. First, it introduces Luther's theology of the powerful Word of God. The Word that

1. Some contend that Pentecostalism is a "fourth" major Christian tradition alongside Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism, but this must always be balanced with its historical emergence from distinctly Protestant traditions (i.e., Wesleyan-Holiness and Higher Life movements) and its continuing Protestant features, not least of which is its abiding commitment to the Bible as final authority in matters of faith and life. Cf. Anderson, "The Future of Protestantism," 439.

God speaks creates what is spoken; this is not dependent on its reception by faith, but is the solid ground on which faith takes its stand. On the one hand, this Word is not, primarily, Scripture but the spoken Word of preaching—a positive door to dialogue. On the other hand, according to Luther the Spirit only follows this Word and does not bring forth new, extra-biblical spiritual words—an obstacle. A second section then explores the place of the Bible and charismatic word-gifts in relation to one another in Pentecostalism, and how each are to be heard as the Word of God. A third and final section bridges some of the remaining distance between Luther and Pentecostalism via an unlikely source, John Calvin, and notes some striking similarities between Luther’s theology of faith and that of an early Pentecostal, F. F. Bosworth.

A Lutheran Theology of the Word

Central to the theology of Luther and other Reformers was a fresh understanding of the Word of God as a living, active and effective divine power. As Luther puts it evocatively in his comments on Ps 2, “And when [God] speaks, the mountains tremble, kingdoms are scattered, then indeed the whole earth is moved.”² The Word has power, God’s own infinite power by which he spoke all things into existence from nothing. The Word of God is, therefore, fundamentally his creative word. For God to speak is to bring something into being; it is also to hold it in being. As Luther says in his lectures on Genesis, “For because God once said, ‘Be fruitful’ [Gen 1:28], that word remains effective up until today and miraculously conserves nature.”³ Indeed, everything that is, in Luther’s theology, is a product of the limitless creative Word of God.

Likewise, for God to promise is for us to already possess what is promised. There is a strict parallel with the work of the

2. Luther, “Lecture on Psalm 2,” 32–33; quoted in Kolb and Arand, *Genius of Luther’s Theology*, 42.

3. Luther, *Vorlesung über 1. Mose von 1535–45*, 138; cf. Kolb and Arand, *Genius of Luther’s Theology*, 42.

Word in creation here. Just as the creation comes into being without any antecedent merit or worthiness—out of nothing—human beings are justified by God without any either, simply by the work of God’s Word and his pronouncement of our righteousness in him. For this reason, Luther is speaking quite literally when he argues, “One cannot go soft or give way on this article [i.e., justification by faith], for then heaven and earth would fall.”⁴ God’s Word is, accordingly, more than “performative speech,” as Robert Kolb puts it, doing things such as commanding obedience, promising forgiveness of sin, or calling the Church together; God’s Word is “creative speech,” effectively bringing about obedience, forgiveness of sin, and a people called the Church.⁵

It is not just, for Luther, that Church is the place where, and the people to whom, the Word of God is spoken. The Word of the gospel calls the Church, like creation, into being in the first place. As he states succinctly, “Where the Word is, there is the church”—*Ubi est verbum, ibi est ecclesia*.⁶ Just as the Word creates light out of darkness, it creates the Church out of unbelief; and it is the Word that sustains the Church along its way.⁷ God’s Word, in short, is powerful; it speaks into our sin and death and brings forth grace and new life.

Human faith in this Word is grounded in the fact that it is *God’s* Word, not some mere human word. Luther writes, commenting on Abraham’s faith in Rom 4, that the patriarch “was comforted by faith, giving glory to God, because by believing he attributed to him the truth and power in his words.”⁸ Abraham was “fully persuaded” (Rom 4:21), “namely, by faith, since whatever God promises he is also able to do. For his truth makes it that he may not promise what he is not able to do. Human

4. Luther, *Die Promotionsdisputation von Palladius und Tilemann*, 205; quoted in Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 98.

5. Kolb, *Martin Luther*, 132; cf. Kolb and Arand, *Genius of Luther’s Theology*, 135.

6. Luther, *Die Promotionsdisputation von Johannes Macchabaus Scotus*, 176; cited in Silcock, “Luther on the Holy Spirit,” 296.

7. Kolb, *Martin Luther*, 154.

8. Luther, *Die Vorlesung über den Römerbrief*, 48.

beings, since they are deceitful, often promise what they cannot do. His power makes it that he cannot change and, so, lie.”⁹

Note the direction: God’s Word is true and powerful, and therefore Abraham believed it to his comfort and salvation. It is not that faith “activates” the power of God’s Word, as one sometimes hears in Pentecostal churches, such that without human faith God’s Word fails to come to pass. No, for Luther, the Word of God is true and powerful, having the One who cannot lie for its author; the human task is simply to receive and believe this Word in faith. Indeed, without the Word there would be no human being to believe or disbelieve what God has said. The Word is wholly ontologically fundamental, to use a technical phrase; or as Luther, again, states in more existential language, “God’s truth is more certain than my heart, and his Word is more certain than my faith.”¹⁰

Thus, we have a basic sketch of the Word of God in Luther’s theology: the Word is a living, active, and effective divine power. But to bring this into dialogue with Pentecostalism, one needs to say something about the place of the Spirit in this picture. Here is where troubles may emerge. Luther forged his theology of the relationship of Word and Spirit in controversy with spiritualist reformers he called “enthusiasts.” They held that it was possible to receive spiritual illuminations, including words and visions, from the Spirit apart from the Word. In this way, Luther felt, they denigrated the Word of God and opened themselves to all kinds of self- and demonic deception.¹¹ The Word of God in Scripture, in the gospel, is certain because *God* speaks it; one cannot be sure, Luther contends, what spirit inspires these other words.

For this reason, Luther argues that “God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before.”¹² The Spirit does not give other words or visions than those given to us in the Bible. Jeffrey Silcock argues that

9. Luther, *Die Vorlesung über den Römerbrief*, 48.

10. Luther, “Predigt am Sonntag Septuagesima, Nachmittags,” 45.

11. Luther, “The Smalcald Articles,” 530.

12. Luther, “The Smalcald Articles,” 530.

this is not, for Luther, “a limitation of God’s [and specifically, the Spirit’s] sovereign freedom.” It is rather meant “to stress God’s reliable promise to be present where he says he will be present,”¹³ namely, in his Word and in the sacraments which contain words of promise. We know they are from God. On these grounds, it seems certain Luther would reject Pentecostal claims to receive spiritual words. Nevertheless, there is one door he leaves open just a crack, one through which Luther and Pentecostals can perhaps speak to one another on this matter.

This door is the following: there is ambiguity about what the ‘Word of God’ refers to in Luther’s theology, and Christian theology more broadly. Sometimes it refers to the second person of the Trinity, other times to the Bible, and still others to the preaching of the Word. All three of these are seen to be this living, active, and creative power. Indeed, for Luther it is not primarily the Bible that is God’s Word, rather:

The fundamental form of the means of the Spirit is the oral Word of the gospel, by which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world. The proclamation of the gospel in the divine service is a continuation of Jesus’ own preaching, for Christ himself speaks to the church today through the proclaimed Word by the power of the Spirit.¹⁴

In the preaching of the Word, the living Word, Christ himself, still speaks today.

A Pentecostal Theology of the Word

This emphasis opens space for consideration of a Pentecostal theology of the Word of God, one that hears the Bible as God’s Word, and, like Luther, preaching as God’s own voice, but also, beyond Luther, other words outside the Bible. To begin with Luther and Pentecostals have in common, however: Pentecostalism gives primacy of place to the sermon, the proclaimed Word

13. Silcock, “Luther on the Holy Spirit,” 298.

14. Silcock, “Luther on the Holy Spirit,” 297; cf. Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 35, with reference to Luther, “Lecture on Psalm 51,” 369; Luther, “Die Schmalkaldischen Artikel,” 240; Luther, *Book of Concord*, 310.

of God, and to the Bible as God's utterly trustworthy written Word, just as did Luther. Coming out of Methodism, early Pentecostal leaders like Charles Fox Parham (1873–1929) can speak of “prov[ing] all things by the Word of God” and “the sweet relief of being shut away with the Word of God, where we may learn what He says and hear Him speak.”¹⁵ In both places Parham is referring to the Bible. Pentecostalism has been, and remains, a resolutely biblical form of Christianity deriving ultimately from the Protestant Reformation.¹⁶

For this reason, it is not disingenuous to point to Luther's admission of the Spirit's giving of the preached Word, a Word beyond the Bible, as a door slowly creaking open. It is significant that following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the apostle Peter stands up and, filled with the Spirit, preaches the Word of God (Acts 2:14–36). The preacher's words are not themselves the words of the Bible: they contain the biblical words, but they also repeat them, differently, expand on them and apply them. All these words, according to Luther, are also the Word of God in which the divine Word, the living Christ, speaks to his people.¹⁷ Pentecostals likewise believe that pastors are given words to speak to their congregations through the Spirit's anointing.¹⁸ They are the very words Christ wishes to say to his own people.

Further—though here we perhaps shove a foot through the door's opening—Pentecostals believe that God, through the outpouring of the Spirit, gifts a variety of extrabiblical words to the Church. Indeed, wherever the Spirit is poured out in Acts, there speech comes forth. These Spirit-given words include not only preaching, like Peter at Pentecost, but also prophecy, other tongues and their interpretation, and words of wisdom and knowledge; these, too, are the Word of God. They repeat, elucidate, expand, and apply the words of the Bible, the purposes

15. Parham, *Kol Kare Bomidbar*, 32–33.

16. “That Pentecostalism is a Bible-centred faith can hardly be debated.” Bonino, “Changing Paradigms,” 117.

17. For a longer version of this argument drawing on Lutheran biblical commentary, see Harris, “The Word(s) the Spirit Gives,” 295–309.

18. For an example, see Martin, “Fire in the Bones,” 17–33.

for which they were given, and the realities about which they speak. Unlike the Bible, they are not abidingly normative or valid, as are the words of Scripture are, but for the limited purposes for which they are given they are to be heard as God's Word.

Pentecostals know that God's Word is powerful and creative, both in the Bible and in these spiritual word-gifts. Early Pentecostal writer Fred Francis Bosworth (1877–1958) contends as much about the biblical promise of Spirit-baptism itself. "The Scriptures tell us," he writes, "that when Christ ascended up on high He gave gifts unto men," referring to Eph 4:8, itself quoting Ps 68:18.¹⁹ Therefore, Bosworth argues, one does not need to labour and anguish over receiving the "sign" of baptism in the Spirit; rather, one simply puts their "faith" in "Christ's encouraging words, 'How much MORE will your heavenly Father give the Holy Ghost to them that ask him,'" here quoting Luke 11:13.²⁰ The Bible is to be trusted because it has God, who cannot deceive, as its author. If Christ promised his waiting disciples they would be baptized with the Spirit not many days hence (Acts 1:5), this is an absolutely sure promise.

In parallel fashion, Spirit-given words of prophecy, tongues-interpretation or knowledge are to be received as God's Word, and thus, responded to with trust, obedience, and thankfulness. Again, these spiritual words are not inspired with universal, abiding validity for the Church, as are the Scriptures, but they are given by the Spirit for limited, determinate purposes in the life of God's people today.

19. Bosworth, *Do All Speak in Tongues?* 137–48 (140).

20. Bosworth, *Do All Speak in Tongues?* 143, 145, emphasis original. Bosworth's account is admittedly not as Lutheran as I have made him sound here. While on the one hand polemicizing against the seeking of external evidences in tongues, he relies on other experiential markers of a person's having received Spirit baptism: "After God has most powerfully baptized the seeker, and with perfect faith divinely inwrought, he is rejoicing with joy unspeakable and full of glory with every ounce of his flesh quivering under the power of the indwelling Spirit, some one will tell him that he has not yet received the Holy Ghost because he did not speak in tongues. This destroys his faith . . ." (143–44).

To illustrate this, here are three quite different examples from Pentecostals past and present. David Wesley Myland (1858–1943), an early Pentecostal, shares how God told him on a train ride to “[t]arry in Chicago until Pentecost.”²¹ So he did, finding confirmation of his correct discernment of God’s Word in God’s providential arrangement of what followed.²² “Nobody planned this,” he writes, “but all the Spirit’s leadings, all my praying, and all God’s communications to me have led up to this very point.”²³ God’s Word to him called forth Myland’s obedience, and brought about a fruitful period of ministry.

In the proto-Pentecostal Finnish revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, something called “trance preaching” was very common.²⁴ This phenomenon involved laypeople—often women and girls—preaching while in an ecstatic state “about the goodness of Jesus” and the need to repent.²⁵ People responded strongly to this trance preaching, hearing it as the Word of God. As evidence, “arguments and lawsuits ceased, theft, drunkenness, magic fortunetelling, card playing and dancing decreased.”²⁶ That a Lutheran minister was central to one of these revivals, and that *preaching* was one of its chief spiritual signs, holds an interesting point of contact for our dialogue. The Word of God came forth from the Spirit outside the Bible, and repentance and transformation were created in human lives. (Conversely, that in one of these revivals, the so-called “Jumping Revival” of 1817–1836, visions, dreams and revelations were treated as a “second source of doctrine” and, at its highest peak,

21. Myland, *Latter Rain Covenant*, 71–78 (72).

22. Myland, *Latter Rain Covenant*, 72–73: “I had no idea then of giving these special addresses, but somehow in God’s providence they were thrust upon me just at a time to bring us to this phase of the subject on this, the anniversary of the day of Pentecost.”

23. Myland, *Latter Rain Covenant*, 73.

24. Ruohomäki, “Call of Charisma,” 26–41. They were “proto-Pentecostal” because of the prominence of tongues-speaking in the revivals (30–33, 34–36, 38, 41).

25. Ruohomäki, “Call of Charisma,” 27–29.

26. Ruohomäki, “Call of Charisma,” 29.

use of the Bible was prohibited, illustrates a boundary a sound Pentecostal theology of the Word may not cross.)²⁷

Bridging and Extending the Dialogue

The Word of God is living and powerful in its various Spirit-given forms, as the written Word of the Bible or the spoken Word of proclamation, prophecy or revelation (cf. 1 Cor 14:26). It is to be met, in each of these forms, with faith, which does not establish the truth of these words but simply receives them. But how are we to know which words are really the Word of God through his Spirit and which arise from the human spirit, or worse? The answer, in short, is discernment.

Here the words of another Reformer are significant. The Reformation of John Calvin (1509–1564) in Geneva was informed in fundamental ways by Luther’s in Wittenberg a generation earlier. He addresses the question of Spirit-given words beyond the Bible in his commentary on 1 Cor 14:29, “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.” Calvin writes:

It seems improper to allow human beings to sit in judgment over God’s teaching, which should be set beyond all dispute. I answer, that God’s teaching is not subjected to human censorship, but it is only granted that they may weigh, by the Spirit of God, *whether it is his own Word* that is proposed, or whether human imaginations are masked by this false pretext.²⁸

27. Ruohomäki, “Call of Charisma,” 37. A personal example is relevant here. I spoke at a young adults retreat where I had opportunity to pray for several people after my message. While praying for one young woman, the word “champion” kept impressing itself on my mind. I was hesitant, but I shared that I believed God was speaking this word “champion” over her life, that she was a “champion” in Christ despite whatever she was going through. She broke down, telling me that she had been feeling so defeated. But now she was able to hear God’s Word to her, and to receive it in faith as God’s truth about her life. God made her a champion by speaking his Word of truth over her.

28. Calvin, *Commentarius*, 529, emphasis added.

Calvin and Luther are often paired together as equally opposed to spiritual “enthusiasm” because of the potential for demonic and self-deception. Yet these comments reveal that Calvin, in fact, had a more careful and probing theology of discernment than did Luther.

For Luther, everything apart from the Word of Scripture is pernicious—even though he allowed that the Word’s primary form is oral proclamation from the pulpit. Calvin, interestingly, considers a “prophet” in 1 Corinthians as a pastor who, first, preaches his interpretation of the Word and, second, is enabled by grace to apply it to the present needs of the Church.²⁹ This is not quite what is meant by prophecy in Pentecostal-charismatic circles, but it is not inimical to it. A prophet, in Pentecostalism, is—or should be—always someone who with an intimate knowledge of the written Word of God, who by grace receives a special word from the Spirit for the present needs of the Church, or an individual or group within it. Calvin counsels discernment here not as standing in judgment over the word of prophecy, but making the either-or judgment “whether it is his own Word that is proposed” or not. If it is, then it must be accorded faith as coming from the mouth of God himself. Again, this word will have a role to play in God’s intentions for this individual, group or church for the present time—perhaps even over a lifetime—but it is not accorded the same weight or authority as the Spirit-inspired Scripture.

This Lutheran-Pentecostal theology of the Word has significant implications for ministry. The concern of the early Pentecostal F. F. Bosworth was certainly a pastoral one, and parallel to Luther’s. Though still contended for by classical Pentecostals today, the teaching that tongues is the sole initial evidence of Spirit baptism, in Bosworth’s view, “destroys [one’s] faith” and “puts them to seeking” with strain and labour what Christ has promised they already possess. “Nothing short of faith”—“assuring

29. Calvin, *Commentarius*, 506. See further, Harris, “The Word(s) the Spirit Gives,” 305–6 n. 35.

faith,” as he calls it—“can satisfy the heart and give us power.”³⁰ What sign could be needed beyond the certain Word of divine promise? Luther’s theology of the Word of God as a living, effective power also had deeply pastoral intentions. To hear the divine promise of the gospel in the Word by faith is to be absolutely assured of one’s standing before God, and thereby consoled in one’s conscience with unshakeable confidence. In Bosworth’s phrase, it is to have our hearts satisfied.

But Bosworth’s claim also goes beyond this in a Pentecostal direction: not only does “assuring faith” “satisfy the heart”; it also “gives us power.”³¹ This is because faith includes faith in Jesus’ promise to the apostles, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” For what purpose? “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This is the classic Pentecostal theme of Spirit-baptism as empowerment for witness.³² This promise, because it is the Word of God, spoken by the incarnate Word of God and inspired in the written Word of God, is to be received by Christians in faith. And, to end this dialogue by holding out God’s own Word of promise, this power from the Spirit is “for you and your children,” for Luther, and those followers of his who have not yet received this promise, “for,” finally, “all whom the Lord our God will call” (cf. Acts 2:38).

30. Bosworth, *Do All Speak in Tongues?* 144. Beyond the parallels with Luther’s theology of faith, Bosworth stands in closer historical relationship to the theology of Holiness Methodist theologian Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874). Palmer and her family were associated with a stream of Methodism serious about John Wesley’s idea of “Christian perfection” or “entire sanctification.” This stream taught that this entire sanctification involved an experience distinct from and subsequent to conversion, yet Palmer found that though they prepared, laboured and sought this experience, few found it. Palmer’s discovery, which she wrote about in her influential book, *The Way of Holiness* (1849), was simply to take the Word of God in faith, believing that she had received the promise of sanctification, even without a confirming experience, evidence or corresponding emotion. The parallel to Bosworth’s theology of faith in the promise of Spirit-baptism subsequent to conversion, even without the initial evidence of tongues, is compelling. Cf. Zahl, “Experience,” 186–88.

31. Bosworth, *Do All Speak in Tongues?* 144.

32. See especially, Menzies, *Empowered for Witness*.

Conclusion

The power of the Word of God was central to Luther's theology and reformation of the Church. It was on this solid ground that Luther's faith could rest in absolute surety, knowing himself justified by faith alone in God's promise regardless of his own merit, or lack thereof. In Pentecostalism, likewise, the Word of God is powerful and utterly trustworthy. This holds not least for the biblical promise from Christ that he would pour out the Holy Spirit on his followers, giving them power to be his witnesses from Jerusalem to the farthest reaches of the world. But it is also true of the words inspired by the Spirit in the Spirit-baptized: words of preaching, prophecy, wisdom, knowledge, or the interpretation of tongues.

To understand the pentecostal-charismatic gifts as a form of the Word of God, therefore, is to hear a word of prophecy or knowledge as the powerful and effective Word of God himself. The One who is true and trustworthy, who has spoken in Scripture, now speaks again with divine insight, power, truth and authority. He speaks in conformity with the biblical Word—for he speaks the self-same Word—but now differently, confirming, elucidating and applying it, just like the preached Word so treasured by Luther and the Reformation.

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