

Ways the Son of Man calls forth life

Seeking the kingdom of God in word and sacrament

David R. Bickel

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Introduction

In 1531, the first Protestants clarified some fundamental similarities between the preached word of God and the sacraments, the rites instituted by Christ:

Through the Word and the rite God simultaneously moves the heart to believe and take hold of faith, as Paul says (Rom. 10:17), "Faith comes from what is heard." As the Word enters through the ears to strike the heart, so the rite itself enters through the eyes to move the heart. The Word and the rite have the same effect, as Augustine said so well when he called the sacrament "the visible Word," for the rite is received by the eyes and is a sort of picture of the Word, signifying the same thing as the Word. Therefore both have the same effect. (Tappert, 2000a)

The Lord's Supper was called the *visible word*, used in contrast to *audible word* by Augustine in an age of general illiteracy, when words were only written to be read out loud. However, in today's culture of silent reading, *visible word* may convey no more than *written word*, whereas the concept of *nonverbal communication*, conveying thought by means other than words heard or read, is quite familiar. Sign language might be the most obvious example, but much more common are the hugs and kisses that convey affection. Many have stressed the importance of hand motions, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues in everyday conversation. Some nonverbal communication is more authoritative in nature. An orchestra listens to every silent signal of its conductor, and urban legend knows of a button by which the president of the United States may command nuclear warfare. These are but faint pictures of the authority of the words of him who calmed the winds and the sea at will.

Before his resurrection, the Son of God used not only spoken words, but also touch, water, and other simple means (tools) to work miracles of healing where there was faith to receive them. After his resurrection, he announced to his disciples that he had been given all power in heaven and in earth, and promised that he would be with them even until the end of the age. As the enthroned, almighty God-Man, he still heals using tools as simple as baptism and teaching (Matthew 28:18-20). Through these *means of grace*, he not only offers forgiveness to those who are dead in their sins, but, by the Spirit he sent, he also supernaturally creates the faith that grasps the offer.

Sovereign invitations of the Son of Man

Sovereign spoken words of the Son of Man

As the Roman soldier exercised his authority by commanding those under him, Jesus exercised his sovereignty by proclaiming healing when there was faith to receive it (Matthew 8:5-13). That Jesus proclaimed the gospel and pronounced the forgiveness of sins with the same

sovereign authority by which he commanded healing is seen throughout Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts. To authoritatively pronounce sins forgiven is no easier than to authoritatively tell a paralyzed man to get up and walk, so when Jesus did the latter, he proved that he also did the former (Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26). As another example, in telling the disciples of John the Baptist the acts by which Jesus verified that he was the Messiah, Jesus recounted proclaiming the gospel to the poor alongside his healing miracles (Matthew 11:2-6). Such healing, including exorcism, was more than a sign to authenticate his message, but was primarily a foretaste of complete healing, the goal of his atonement: as he took the effects of the fall on himself, his wounds brought healing to the whole believer (8:16-17). Indeed, he already brought the kingdom of God as he cast out demons in anticipation of Satan's defeat and judgment by the cross (12:26-29). Further, the Greek word used for "heal" means "save" both in accounts of pronouncing physical healing and in accounts of pronouncing the forgiveness of sins: in speaking to the woman who had been forgiven much, Jesus said, "go in peace, your faith has healed you"; likewise, through his representative, Jesus "saved" a man from his paralytic condition (Luke 7:50; 17:19; Johnson, 1997, p. 26, on Acts 4:9-12), as he had "saved" his disciples from drowning (Matthew 8:25; 14:30). Jesus' authoritative words that brought Messianic salvation from demonic possession, physical diseases, and other results of the fall thus paralleled his authoritative words that brought the spiritual healing of the age to come. However, his words did not have their intended effect apart from faith, neither for temporal salvation, nor for eternal healing: Jesus himself could not save in the midst of unbelief, just as Jesus' sincere call, "follow me," was not always headed (Mark 6:5; Matt. 19:21-22; 23:37). Even so, with the blowing of the Spirit, Jesus' invitation created the response required, as when he cried, "Lazarus, come out!" The resurrection of Lazarus foreshadowed the resurrection of the last day, consistent with the meaning of Jesus' miracles in the other gospel accounts (John 11:23-26, 40-44).

Significantly, Jesus commanded the impossible: he told the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the dead to rise. The command supernaturally brought about what was commanded: "Stretch out your hand!" (Matthew 12:13). Equally impossible is the salvation of the rich: they can no more accept Jesus' call to follow him than can a camel enter the eye of a needle, and yet Jesus does sovereignly call the rich since all things are possible with God (19:23-26). By the spoken word, Jesus can call to life the spiritually dead as well as the physically dead.

That God uses the invitation of life to supernaturally create faith in his promise is also seen in the New Testament's teaching of regeneration. Jesus taught Nicodemus that a rebirth by water and by the Spirit was necessary for eternal life, that flesh can only give birth to flesh: regeneration is monergistic in that it is *entirely* the work of God (John 1:12-13; 3:5-8). Lest anyone conclude that the Spirit makes faith in the gospel possible by first bringing about this birth without using the gospel, the New Testament teaches that the gospel, the enduring word of God, supernaturally brings about the regeneration required (1 Peter 1:23-25; Scaer, 1994, on James 1:18). Clowney (1988, p. 76) explains 1 Peter 1:23-25:

Peter compares the life-giving power of the word of God to human procreation. It is the *seed* of life, the sound in our hearts to create new life. God's word is creative: he speaks, and it is done; he commands and it stands fast. "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth." Since God's word is his vocalized breath, it goes forth with the power of his Spirit. The word of the gospel is God's call; he communicates and converts... God's word of promise is self-fulfilling. By the word of God Jesus was born of the virgin Mary; by the word of God we are born anew. [emphasis original]

God fathers children through their faith, according to his own will, not theirs (John 1:12-13; cf. Galatians 3:26-27).

Sovereign nonverbal invitations of the Son of Man

Jesus saved not only by his spoken invitation, but also by other means, especially by his touch, as when he held the hand of the girl he raised, when the woman with the flow of blood was saved by her faith as she touched the hem of his garment, and when others were healed by the shadow of Peter (Acts 5:14-16). Mark even described in detail an instance of healing by the saliva of Jesus (Mark 8:22-26), and John's Gospel has a similar report of healing a blind man (9:6-7): "[Jesus] spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.'" Why did John include such seemingly strange details of how Jesus healed? John plausibly saw parallels with baptism, and the first congregations that heard the Gospel read would have thought immediately of the washing of baptism (Acts 22:16). Although the natural properties of the water of the pool could not wash away the man's blindness, *that water was not only a symbol of his cleansing, but was more importantly the channel by which Jesus cleansed him.* Though in a sense obedient to the command to be washed, he attributed his salvation from blindness to Christ alone, not to any act of obedience; his washing himself in the pool is more properly seen as the mere acceptance of Jesus' gracious offer.¹ In the same way, Paul was invited to wash away his sins in the water of baptism (Acts 22:16), not to perform an act of obedience by which he would rid himself of his sins. Were baptism a human work, then he would have been saved by his own works, but baptism in apostolic thought is a saving act of God. Those coming to receive the free gift of baptism do not baptize themselves, but are baptized by a minister who does so in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Jesus continues to baptize through the agency of his disciples (Matthew 28:18-20; John 4:1-2). In connection with the healing of the blind man, Jesus proclaimed that he came to open the eyes of the spiritually blind, and he later said his word had cleansed the disciples (John 9:39-41; 15:3). Thus, John's report of the miraculous washing clarifies those New Testament texts that explicitly state that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins, that baptism washes away sins, that baptism saves, and that baptism brings about union with Christ (Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; Romans 6:3-5; 1 Corinthians 12:13). None of these things could be true unless baptism were entirely God's work (Titus 3:5). Like Jesus' verbal and nonverbal calls to salvation and healing noted above, baptism does not save automatically, but only when its promise is received with faith (Galatians 3:14, 26-27). In the same way, although the gospel regenerates as the power of God unto salvation (1 Peter 1:23-25), it does so as it is received by faith (Romans 1:16-17; 10:14-17) that is created by the power of the Spirit (John 3:5-8):

The means of grace *actually* convey grace, but not in such a manner as to coerce man to receive them. To the person receiving Baptism, God says: "I will be thy God, and thou shalt be in grace and favor with Me."

¹ This "command" is simply Christ's merciful invitation to receive his gift, e.g., "Stretch out your hand" (Matthew 12:13), not a command in the sense of law, which would bring a penalty if broken or an earned reward if perfectly obeyed. The crucial difference between a command of God's law and his invitation or promise of good news is explained in detail by Walther (1929), e.g., as quoted in Bickel (2005). Jesus came to save lawbreakers, not to issue new laws! He came to relieve heavy burdens, not to make them heavier!

If the person refuses to receive this offer, he obtains no grace; but the reason for that is not because there is no grace for him to receive, but because he despises it. The whole Bible is full of testimonies to the fact that the Word and the Sacraments actually convey the Holy Spirit. For instance, Acts 10, 44... (Walther, 1929, p. 156, emphasis original)ⁱⁱ

The apostles made disciples not only by teaching the nations the words of Jesus, but also by baptizing them in his name; the church still does so in the presence of the man to whom all power has been given (Matthew 28:18-20).

The bread and wine of Lord's Supper constitute another nonverbal proclamation of the good news: at each celebration, through his pastoral representative, Christ pronounces sins forgiven as he gives his body and blood to be eaten and drunk. That invitation is just as sovereign as his other calls to healing and salvation: before instituting the sacrament, Jesus had promised to give his sacrificed flesh and blood as food and drink that, unlike the manna given by Moses, would provide eternal nourishment to believers as they ate and drank (John 6:51ff; cf. Scaer, 2000). What, then, was to prevent the disciples and the first-century church from understanding their Lord's words of institution as an invitation to partake of the present body and blood of the Passover Lamb in hope of receiving spiritual healing? The many times he saved by contact with his body prepared them to take "This is my body" as clear and straightforward.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus is still present, calling forth life

Even before the almighty Son of Man commissioned his apostles with the promise of his continuing presence (Matthew 28:18-20), his ambassadors had used the power delegated to them to cast out demons, to heal, and to proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Through those who act and speak in his name, Jesus continues the deeds and words he had only begun "to do and teach" before giving the promise of the Spirit (Johnson, 1997 on Acts 1:1; John 16:13-14). In that sense, he has even given to men the authority to forgive sins (Matthew 9:8; 18:17-19; John 20:22-23). Ministers of the gospel do not speak on their own authority, but Jesus speaks his almighty word through them, most prominently in the various parts of the church service. In the preaching of the good news, Jesus continues to promise, "Come to me, you who are weary, and I will give the rest" (Matthew 11:28-30). In the assurance of pardon^{iv} and in the benediction, he

ⁱⁱ This founder of the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church went on to note how those who deny that the treasure of grace comes through word and sacrament "deprive us of the method, of the ways and means for getting at the treasure, so that we could enjoy it. They shut us out from the grace which we would very much like to have. They tell us that we must have the *Spirit*; but they will not concede to me the means by which I may *have* the Spirit. How can I receive the Spirit and believe when the Word of God is not preached and the Sacraments are not administered to me? I must have the means; for 'faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God,' Rom. 10, 17." (Walther, 1929, p. 161, emphasis original)

ⁱⁱⁱ The gospel accounts undermine the objection that since, in the words of institution, Jesus addresses the disciples, not the bread and wine, those words cannot bring about the real presence of his body and blood. For the centurion's servant was healed by the words spoken to the centurion, and the official's son was healed by the words spoken to the official (Matthew 8:8-13; John 4:50-53).

^{iv} The Lutheran liturgy powerfully expresses the presence of the friend of sinners: "Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of a Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the

continues to promise, “Your sins are forgiven, go in peace.” In baptism, he continues to promise, “It is my will that *you* participate in my death, burial, and resurrection; this water washes away *your* sins.” He reminds you that you died to sin as your baptism united you to his death, ensuring that you will share in his resurrection (Romans 6:2-5). In his Supper, he continues to promise, “Here are my body and my blood, sacrificed for *you*, for the forgiveness of *your* sins.”^v Far from an impotent expression of desire, the word of the Lord, whether spoken or visible, will not return to him empty, but will accomplish what he desires and achieve the purpose for which he sent it (Isaiah 55:1-13).

Knowing the weaknesses of his disciples, Jesus graciously grants them forgiveness and the resulting life not only through his spoken word, but also through the nonverbal means of grace: “Both Scripture and experience teach that men who feel the weight of their sins find nothing harder to believe than the forgiveness of their sins. Hence repetition of the assurance of the forgiveness of sins in various ways through the means of grace meets a practical need of Christians” (Pieper, 1950, p. 114).^{vi} By those ways of calling forth life, the Lord, enthroned at the right hand of God and present with his church, having received all power, defeats the kingdom of Satan now no less than when by exorcism he demonstrated the presence of the coming kingdom (Matthew 12:26-29):

The Sacraments are more than signs. They are acts of God, miracles of Christ, in which the saving works of his earthly days continue, just as does his proclamation of the Gospel in the preaching of his church. Just as the healing of the lame, the blind, the leprous and the raising of the dead were not only a “visible Word”... but more than that, namely, deeds in which the advent of the kingdom of God was announced. Thus the kingdom of God is already present in the Sacraments. And just as Word and deed, or more precisely, deed and Word (according to Matt 11:5 and Luke 24:19), belong inseparably together in the works of Jesus, so Word and Sacrament belong together in the life of the church, and indeed not only in baptismal, confessional, or Lord’s Supper addresses, but ever again also in the Sunday sermon, in the Bible class, ... (Sasse, 2002, pp. 157-158)

In conclusion, believers are not to rely on their memory or other evidence of once having received a now distant Christ, but are to continually find Immanuel where he has chosen to reveal

Son and of the Holy Ghost” (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 1941, p. 48). This absolution has little in common with Roman Catholic absolution, but rests firmly on a clear understanding of the gospel as good news (Walther, 1929).

^v Luther noted the primary means of grace: “We shall now return to the Gospel, which offers council and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren. Matt. 18:20, ‘Where two or three are gathered,’ etc.” (Tappert, 2000b).

^{vi} Calvinists, Arminians, and synergistic Lutherans mean something very different when they speak of assurance by word and sacrament. To the extent that they are consistent with their theological systems, they require penitent sinners to find in themselves evidence of a decision, faith, sanctification, or the Spirit before seeking assurance from the means of grace. They warn that the promise made in word and sacrament is only made on certain conditions; the particular conditions vary from one system to another. Section 18.2 of the Westminster Confession of Faith provides an excellent example. It seems to begin well by saying that the assurance of faith is “founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation,” but then goes on to make those promises *conditional* on “the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made.” May all who, like many of the Puritans, are burdened by the elusive search for such inner evidence, come to the meek and lowly Savior for rest: all are justified who are assured, not by anything in themselves, but by the unconditional promise he sincerely makes in word and sacrament. Saving faith rests in the good news alone, not in any perceptions of faith, of sanctification, or of internal revelations of the Spirit (Bickel, 2005).

himself. He is surely present wherever two or three are gathered in his name, as his Spirit imparts his resurrection life by human speech,^{vii} by water, and by wine, the simple tools through which he invites sinners to take the forgiveness he purchased on the cross. With these means of grace, he supernaturally creates the faith needed for them to believe the promise of forgiveness; he thereby brings his victory over death and sin to a world otherwise under the sway of the evil one. The exalted Lord must continue to thus reign until his Father has put the last enemy under his feet (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). To believe the good news proclaimed by Jesus himself in word and sacrament is what it means to labor for the bread that endures to eternal life, to seek the kingdom of God, to receive the one thing needed (Luke 4:18; 8:10-11, 15; 10:38-42; 12:31; John 6:27).^{viii}

^{vii} The Lutheran's reliance on God's word differs profoundly from that of the selective literalist:

The greatness and uniqueness of the Lutheran concept of the church is in this connection between its view of the church and its view of the Word of God... The Fundamentalists also pose the question of truth over against all churches on the basis of their strict biblicism. But what a difference there is between their view of the Bible, which elevates the letter of the Bible to law for human thought and dealings, and the Lutheran doctrine of the Word of God! Over against the mechanism [sic] and clandestine materialism of that way of explaining the Bible stands genuine Lutheran theology as something completely different. Lutheranism conceives of the Word of God as something more living, because it considers it first as the spoken and incarnate Word, and only secondly as the written Word (Sasse, 2001, p. 56).

^{viii} Bickel (2002) provides an introductory explanation of what it means to seek the kingdom of God.

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