

The Written Word of God (1)

Text: Belgic Confession 3; John 21:20-25

The *Belgic Confession*, in its third article, draws our attention to the history and form of God's revelation. It speaks of God's Word as both spoken and written. These two modes of revelation were not simultaneous throughout history. Rather, there are three distinct phases: one in which only the *spoken* Word of God existed, another which was both *spoken and written*, and finally our present period, in which we possess only the *written* Word.

The first period stretches from the creation of the world to the writing of the earliest parts of Scripture. In this era, God revealed Himself through direct speech, dreams, visions and theophanies. Prophets like Adam, Enoch, Noah and Abraham proclaimed the Word of the Lord. Enoch, we are told in Jude 14–15, prophesied of the Lord's coming in judgment: "Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment upon all." This ancient prophecy was preserved by God and recorded by the apostle Jude many centuries later.

God also spoke in visions and dreams. Eliphaz, in Job 4:12–17, recounts such a dream in which a spirit revealed divine truth to him. Genesis records other revelatory dreams—those of Joseph and Jacob's ladder among them. Dreams were similar to visions: the one occurring in sleep, the other while awake. Alongside these dreams, God spoke audibly to men such as Adam, Cain, Noah and Abraham. There were theophanies—appearances of God to men—when God walked with Adam, appeared to Abraham (as a smoking furnace and then as a man with angels), wrestled with Jacob and appeared to Moses in the burning bush. These appearances were often Christophanies—manifestations of the pre-incarnate Christ.

All of this formed the content of *spoken* revelation. The truth of God was communicated, remembered, and passed down, often orally. This was aided by the great longevity of early patriarchs. Adam lived to the age of 930 and could have conversed with Lamech, the father of Noah. It is plausible that the knowledge of God was transmitted through these generations with surprising accuracy, especially under the influence of true prophets like Noah, who is described in II Peter 2:5 as "a preacher of righteousness."

From Speech to Scripture

Though spoken revelation was rich, there was no *written* Word in this initial phase. It is possible that written records or genealogical scrolls existed before Moses' time. Genesis 5:1 refers to "the book of the generations of Adam," which Moses may have incorporated under divine inspiration into his own writings. Nevertheless, the divinely inspired Scriptures began in earnest with either the book of Job or the Pentateuch penned by Moses.

With the writing of Job and the books of Moses, a new period began: the second phase of redemptive history, wherein both the spoken and the written Word of God were present. God still spoke through prophets, but He now also commanded that His Word be committed to writing. Article 3 of the *Belgic Confession* states, "[A]fterwards God, from a special care which He has for us and our salvation, commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed Word to writing." The written Word would provide a permanent, public, and reliable form of revelation that could be preserved and transmitted with clarity.

This second phase spans about 1500 years—from Moses to the apostle John. During this period, the canon of Scripture was formed. The Old Testament took shape over about a thousand years, beginning with the books of Moses and ending with Malachi. David composed Psalms, Solomon wrote Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. Later, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the twelve minor prophets contributed. Other prophets—Nathan, Gad, Ahijah and Jehu—existed but did not leave canonical writings. Their absence deprives us of nothing, for the Word of God as we have it is complete for salvation.

Following a period of prophetic silence, revelation resumed with the coming of John the Baptist. Then came the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, who spoke the words of God with divine authority. Hebrews 1 teaches that "God... hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son" (vv. 1-2). During His earthly ministry, Christ spoke often and performed many signs, though not all are recorded. John 20:30-31 and 21:25 indicate that what we have in the gospels is selective but sufficient.

The Closing of the Canon

The apostles spoke by inspiration. Some of their preaching is recorded in Acts and the epistles, though most of their inspired speech is not preserved. Of the thirteen apostles, only four—Matthew, John, Peter and Paul—contributed to

the New Testament canon. Matthew wrote a gospel. John wrote a gospel, three epistles and Revelation. Peter authored two epistles. Paul wrote at least thirteen letters. The rest – Andrew, Thomas, Bartholomew and others – left no inspired writings. We have only a portion of what they said and did, but it is sufficient.

Other inspired writers – Mark, Luke, James, and Jude – were prophets, not apostles. Luke wrote both his gospel and the book of Acts. These men may have drawn on apostolic testimony, but their writings were divinely inspired.

With the death of the apostle John, the second phase ended. The canon was closed. There are no more apostles, no more prophets, and no more new revelations. The written Word is complete. Article 3 of the *Belgic Confession* closes, “Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.” We no longer receive spoken revelations, dreams, visions, or theophanies. Nor do we have oral traditions passed down from apostles or prophets. What we do have is the sixty-six books of the Bible, and they are enough.

This is the third and final phase: the era of the written Word alone. Today, we possess no inspired speech beyond Scripture. There is no spoken Word of God circulating outside the Bible. No living prophet or apostle brings new or supplementary revelation. This is a high privilege. We have the *full canon* – more than the patriarchs, more than Israel under the prophets, more even than the churches who heard Paul and Peter. We have the *entire scope* of redemptive revelation – clear, permanent, and inspired!

Sola Scriptura: Our Sole Rule

Rome challenges the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. It speaks of two streams: Scripture and tradition. The Roman Catholic Church claims that oral tradition is a second form of God’s Word. It appeals to the idea of spoken revelation in Scripture to justify a continuing spoken word in its magisterium and papacy. The Pope, when speaking *ex cathedra*, is said to be infallible. But this contradicts the finality of Scripture and the cessation of revelation.

The Reformers opposed this. They taught *sola scriptura* – not that Scripture was the only source of knowledge, but the only *infallible rule* of faith and life. Article 3 of the *Belgic Confession* acknowledges that spoken revelation existed but teaches that it has now ceased. It concedes nothing to Rome. It affirms that from God’s “special care... for us and our salvation,” He caused His Word to be written down, and that we now rely solely on that written Word.

This doctrine should not be unsettling. It should provoke thanksgiving. We do not need prophets or apostles today: God has already given us His complete Word. We do not wait for new revelations. We have, in Scripture, all that is necessary for faith and life. The closing of the canon is a blessing, not a loss. It preserves us from error, delivers us from human speculation, and secures for us a fixed standard of truth.