

CONCORDIA  
THEOLOGICAL  
QUARTERLY

CTQ

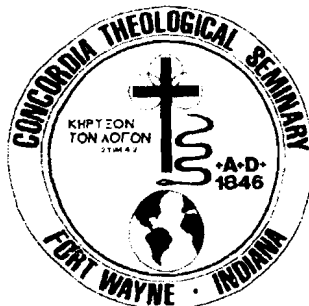
Volume 46, Numbers 2-3

---

APRIL — JULY 1982

---

Henry J. Eggold, Th.D., D.D. ....	97
Announcement .....	101
Justification through Faith in Article Four of the Apology .....	Martim C. Warth 105
Justification as a Doctrine of the Old Testament .....	Raymond F. Surburg 129
The Clarity of Scripture and Hermeneutical Principles in the Lutheran Confessions .....	Erling T. Teigen 147
Evangelical Hermeneutics .....	Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. 167
Are Law and Gospel a Valid Her- meneutical Principle? .....	Horace Hummel 181
The Theology of the Word in John Gerhard .....	Bengt Hägglund 209
Luther and Erasmus .....	Daniel Preus 219
"The Word of My Patience" in Revelation 3:10 .....	Theodore Mueller 231
Ways of Saving Time and Labor in Parish Administration .....	Gary C. Genzen 235
Theological Observer .....	241
Book Reviews .....	245
Book Comments .....	255
Books Received .....	259



# The Theology of the Word in John Gerhard

Bengt Hägglund

It was a fundamental principle of seventeenth century Protestantism, inherited from the Reformation, that the word of God as the foundation of the Christian faith was to have its place in the center of academic theology, even as it was central in the life and activity of the church. The idea of Holy Scripture as the "only principle" (*principium unicum*) of theology expressed the main concern of the Reformation in the field of scholarly education.<sup>1</sup> The term "principle" (*principium*) was here used with a strictly scientific meaning. Drawn from Aristotelian science, the term indicated the point of departure of a scientific argument or the foundation upon which the demonstration of the evidence was built.<sup>2</sup>

Holy Scripture as the principle of theology is, however, only one side of the seventeenth century doctrine of the word of God. The other side is the description of the word of God as a means of grace; that is, Scripture and the preaching of the gospel mediate grace through their power to create faith in the heart of man. There is a clear connection between the word as principle of theology and as means of grace, for in both cases the word is correlated to faith. For the understanding of Scripture and its use in theological argument presupposes, in addition to the light of reason, what is called the *illuminatio Spiritus Sancti*, the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. This is an important epistemological principle, radically different from that which springs from the Cartesian and Kantian revolution in philosophy and which underlies most of modern theology. In his *Tract on the Interpretation of Holy Scripture*,<sup>3</sup> John Gerhard explains what is meant by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. He uses Aristotelian epistemology; knowledge has its origin in the object from which intelligible notions are received in the mind and apprehended by the intellect. Thus, theological knowledge originates in the enscripturated word of God. But the light of the natural intellect is insufficient to comprehend the truth of the Bible; it must be strengthened through the Spirit's illumination. So the truth of the word of God is comprehended by the human intellect, but an intellect whose capacity is increased through

spiritual enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> This doctrine of spiritual illumination implies that faith is engaged in the interpretation of the Bible; even in the intellectual work of theology the correlation between the word of God and faith is apparent. Here we see an inner connection between the doctrine of Scripture as a principle of theology, with which Gerhard begins his system of dogmatics, and the doctrine of the word as a means of grace, which he discusses in the context of soteriology.

These two perspectives have an additional presupposition in common — in both cases it is implied that the word is efficient. It is not only a means of knowledge, but also has the power to enlighten the inward man. This doctrine of the word was controversial already in Gerhard's time and was by no means obvious to all. Balthasar Meisner, a theologian at Wittenberg and a contemporary of Gerhard, directed some important remarks on this question against the renowned Reformed philosopher, Rudolf Goclenius of Marburg.<sup>5</sup> Goclenius held that the pronounced word must be considered only a sound that dies away. Thus, the word could be called a cause of conversion only when it was apprehended and contemplated. Indeed, it was not then the word as such that was the instrumental cause of the new life and an efficient instrument of the Holy Spirit, but rather the hearing and assimilating of that word.

Meisner finds two false conclusions and two hidden heresies in Goclenius' position. First, like the spiritualist Caspar Schwenckfeldt before him, Goclenius falsely distinguishes between the external and the internal word. The preached word of Scripture is not only a human voice, an inefficient sound, but a living, efficacious, and fruitful word. Secondly, Goclenius regards the hearing and intellectual assimilating of the word to be more than just a *conditio sine qua non*; it is an actual cause of conversion. Against this position, Meisner holds that the word of God is endowed with a supernatural — not a physical or rational — power whereby it is able to convert a man. Meisner discusses this issue with a philosopher, but he is fully aware that it concerns a matter of faith. The basis of his position lies in the numerous biblical propositions which indicate the efficacious power of the word (e.g., Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 119:50; Romans 1:16).

This issue became central in the Rahtmannian struggle, a controversy which began in the second decade of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> This debate has a special significance, for it gave the Lutheran theologians an occasion once again to take up the entire doctrine of the word of God and explain it also from some

philosophical perspectives. Gerhard wrote a *Gutachten* (1628) which is outstanding among the many publications in this debate.<sup>7</sup> His account is not only the best analysis of the debate, but also a valuable contribution to the philosophy of language and the theology of the word in Lutheran orthodoxy.

The Rahtmannian debate centered on this question: What is the word which brings about grace and creates faith in the heart of man? Goclenius had answered that it was merely a sound that died away, but this response, as we have seen, was unacceptable to the Lutheran theologians. The question was again addressed in a book written by a Lutheran pastor in Danzig, Hermann Rahtmann. In it he formulates an important question: If the word is efficacious as the Bible says, how can it be that preaching seems so inefficient, that so many hear the word but so few are converted? Rahtmann answers that we must distinguish between the outer word, which is only a sign of an instrument, and the inner word, which, spoken by the Holy Spirit, penetrates into the heart. The Bible, accordingly, gives us only an objective knowledge. It becomes a living word leading to conversion only when completed by an illumination by the Spirit evoked in the inward man:

For if the word of God, which the apostles and prophets had in themselves and then is pictured externally in the Scripture, is to enlighten the hearts of men yet in our days, then the external word or the Holy Ghost must create it by an enlightenment within the Scripture and outside the Scripture.<sup>8</sup>

Rahtmann explains this position metaphorically: The color on a wall or on a picture cannot be perceived by the eye until it is illuminated by the daylight or another source of light. The color on the wall or the picture has no light in itself. Similarly, the Holy Spirit must shed light into the heart of man if he is to understand and find the right way to life through Scripture.<sup>9</sup> Rahtmann also compares Scripture to a signpost that shows where to go but itself has no power to lead anyone in the right direction and must be illuminated if it is to be seen at all.

Thus, Rahtmann held that Scripture is only an external word which has no power in itself to convert a man. The outer word is simply a witness of the inner word which existed in the souls of the apostles, in the same way as the words of any book express the inner meaning of the author. From this premise Rahtmann draws the conclusion that it must be the illumination of the Holy Spirit — which is previous to, and also simultaneous with, the reading of

the external word — which is the true cause of conversion and regeneration. The external word of Scripture may be an instrument of the Holy Spirit's activity, but the meaning of Scripture, perceived in the inner man, must be completed by the "power and light of God's grace" before the word can have any effect. Rahtmann finds the meaning of Scripture not in the external word, but in the inner man.

In his *Gutachten* Gerhard counters Rahtmann by examining the question of what is meant by the term "Holy Scripture." Rahtmann errs, according to Gerhard, by seeing in Scripture nothing but letters and words on paper. Obviously such letters cannot enter the soul and convert a man; what enters the soul is the meaning and content of the words, and this meaning "is the real form or essence of the Holy Scripture."<sup>10</sup> Gerhard here relies on Aristotelian ontology; everything is composed of form and matter, and the form makes up the essence of the thing. Rahtmann considers the letters and words to be the form of Scripture, but Gerhard and the orthodox theologians, who held that the form or essence of Scripture is its meaning and content, the words and letters being the *materiale* (matter)<sup>11</sup>, could thereby also affirm that Scripture is truly the revealed word of God.

Underlying this discussion is Gerhard's view of the connection between form and matter, or content and external sign. A parallel can be seen in the relation between the divine and human natures of Christ. As in Christ there is a unity of the two natures so that the nature of Christ cannot be correctly described with reference only to the divine nature, even so there is in Scripture a unity of inner content and external word so that Scripture cannot be adequately described with reference only to form or only to material. The inner meaning is "in a wonderful way" united with the words. Indeed, herein lies something of the mystery of language.<sup>12</sup> When Rahtmann erroneously separates the inner from the outer word, or the sign from the thing signified, he is left with a Scripture which consists of nothing more than dead letters.

Separating the inner from the outer word of Scripture, Rahtmann must explain how any contemporary listener is able to hear that inner word which existed in the inner man of the prophets and apostles, but is merely designated by the words of Scripture.<sup>13</sup> He argues that the illumination of the Holy Spirit evokes the inner word within the listener immediately, just as that word was immediately inspired in the apostles and prophets. In no way can it be sought in the external word of Scripture. To buttress this position, Rahtmann borrows an illustration from the

spiritualist Schwenckfeldt:

If one defines Scripture as the meaning and content of what it says, then Scripture should be identical with God, Christ, eternal life, etc. It is impossible to say this, for if a writ says, for example, that Peter owes John one hundred dollars [*Taler*], you cannot then say that the writ is identical with the hundred dollars.

Gerhard shows how this metaphor, and thus the argument, is defective. While he concedes that the writ and the hundred dollars are not identical, he observes that the external words of the writ convey a specific meaning, namely, that Peter owes John one hundred dollars, and therefore the writ, though consisting outwardly only of external words and figures, in fact gives John the right to demand payment of the sum.<sup>14</sup> So also Scripture cannot be identified with the things which the words designate (God, Christ, eternal life, etc.), but rather the essence of Scripture is in fact the content of the doctrine of God, Christ, eternal life, and so forth.

Thus, the contrast between Rahtmann and the orthodox theologians can be seen partly from a philosophical perspective. Rahtmann argues on the assumption of a clear distinction between objective knowledge, which lies in external words or signs, and subjective knowledge in the inner man, where knowledge is assimilated and where the Spirit works. Such a distinction seems intuitively obvious to the modern reader, for it is similar to the distinction which underlies modern empirical thought. Nevertheless, this assumption represents a fundamental break with the Aristotelian epistemology which we find employed in the orthodox theological tradition. According to this theory of knowledge, there is no contrast between subject and object, for the concepts are created in the intellect through the direct influence of the things perceived. Thus, Gerhard can argue against Rahtmann that Scripture has not only a *lumen objecti* ("light of the object"), but also a *lumen subjecti* ("light of the subject"); that is, it has in itself the light that enlightens the intellect. Likewise, Gerhard objects that Rahtmann's illustration of the unlighted signpost is misleading since Scripture, unlike the signpost, has in itself the light that brings clarity and gives life, since Scripture is not merely letters on paper but also the inner meaning of the text and thus the living word of God.<sup>15</sup>

This identification of Scripture with the inner meaning of the text renders the distinction between the external and internal word irrelevant, since the word has the same meaning whether it

exists in the inner man of the prophet, is expressed in his preaching, or is written in a book. It is possible, therefore, according to Gerhard, to speak about the word of God on a number of different levels:

- (1) in God the Holy Ghost Himself;
- (2) in the inner man of the prophets and apostles insofar as they have received the revelation of God;
- (3) in the speech of the prophets and apostles;
- (4) in their writings; and
- (5) in the inner man of the listener, when he hears the word and meditates upon it.<sup>16</sup>

For Gerhard these are not five different kinds of the word of God, but one and the same word which has the same meaning on all five levels. The word is a unity, identical with its inner meaning, be it spoken, written, or pondered in the mind of the hearer.<sup>17</sup> It is thus impossible to acknowledge the existence of an inner word separate from the external word. Only the external word is the instrument of the Spirit.

It is just this point regarding the instrumentality and power of the external word to convert and sanctify man around which the Rahtmannian controversy raged. Considered from another perspective, the question was whether an operation of the Spirit could be posited outside the word — for example, through a direct influence on the mind. That the word itself has power to convert Gerhard finds an unambiguous doctrine of Scripture, for many texts speak of the word of God as life, light, saving power, and the like (Psalm 119:105; John 5:39, 6:63, 17:20; Romans 1:16, 10:18; Hebrews 4:12; 1 Peter 1:23; 2 Peter 1:19).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Article V of the Augsburg Confession clearly teaches that the word and sacraments are truly instruments through which the Spirit is given and faith created. From this truth Gerhard concludes that the word by virtue of divine order has an inner power to convert. The operative principle here is that every effect must come from a power that produces the effect (“*actus secundes praesupponet primum, operatio virtutem*”).<sup>19</sup> The many metaphors in Scripture which speak of the efficacy of the word point in the same direction. There are, for example, the metaphors of the seed (Luke 8:11), of the fire (Luke 24:32; cf. Jeremiah 20:9), of the rain and snow (Isaiah 55:10), and of the light (Psalm 119:105; 2 Peter 1:19).

Gerhard rejects as untenable Rahtmann's argument that the word in itself is not efficacious since it does not work conversion in all who hear it. Gerhard stresses instead the distinction between

the power that is in the word and its actual effects. If the word does not work salvation in everyone, it must be that some have resisted the Holy Spirit, not that the word has no power. This is equally true of Baptism, which continues to be a "water of rebirth" even if this is not the actual effect in those individuals who do not believe. Philosophically, this situation is expressed by the following principle: From the lack of the secondary act one cannot deduce the lack of the primary act ("A remotione actus secundi non potest procedi ad remotionem actus primi"). Thus, when we pray that God would give His Spirit and power with His word, Gerhard notes that we are not confessing an activity of the Spirit outside of the word, but rather we are asking that the efficacious word of God would have in us its proper effect.<sup>20</sup>

An oft-criticized statement of the orthodox theologians in the Rahtmannian debate was that the word is efficacious before and outside its use,<sup>21</sup> though this was only the response to a peripheral question. The nature of this question becomes clearer when one considers two comparisons of the word with the sacraments made in the course of the discussion. First, Rahtmann argues that as one cannot say that the sacraments are efficacious outside their use, so one ought not say that the word is efficacious outside its use. But Gerhard notes an important distinction. The use belongs to the essence of the sacraments (their *ratio formalis*), but hearing or reading do not belong to the essence of the word. Gerhard cites an odd example: When all listeners fall asleep during a sermon, so that no one actually hears what is said, one cannot thereby deny that the preacher speaks the word of God.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, Rahtmann argues that the word is only an external sign, which he likens to the bread of Holy Communion. It is only in their use (hearing the word or eating the bread) that both are the bearers of spiritual gifts. According to Gerhard, this comparison is not correct. It is not the bread in itself which is the bearer of eternal life, but the body of Christ that is distributed with the bread. It is the word itself, however, which Scripture calls spirit and life, a saving power.

The arguments in the Rahtmannian debate delved deeply into the philosophy of language and the theology of the word of God and can, therefore, be viewed both from a philosophical and from a theological perspective. Philosophically, it can be objected that Rahtmann overlooks the link between the external word and its internal meaning. One can also object that, when the orthodox theologians ascribe to the word, they do not explain anything, just as when one asserts that the eye has a power to see or a seed a



power to grow, one in no way explains how it is that an eye can see or a seed grow. Gerhard, however, is fully aware that he is dealing with an inexplicable mystery, both when we say that a proposition is a bearer of meaning and when we say that the word of God is an instrument for the salvation of men. It is already inexplicable that we can learn from ancient writings what Aristotle meant. Certainly, therefore, the theologian cannot be bound to explain how God has revealed His will in Scripture. The connection of inner meaning to external word is as much a wonder as is the connection of the body of Christ to the eucharistic bread. It is the same with Scripture's power to illuminate and convert. This power is given to the word in an invisible and hidden way (*mystice et invisibiliter*). It is not identical to the power of human speech to convince; it is parallel to the latter but lies on another level.

From a theological perspective the result of the Rahtmannian debate is easier to explain. When Gerhard and his colleagues so decidedly reject the contrast of an inner word with an external word of Scripture, they do so because they are convinced that such a distinction conceals a kind of synergism. Rahtmann's theories require a salvation that comes from the inner man, and not from the word and sacraments.<sup>23</sup> Orthodoxy's radical limitation of the Spirit's activity to the external word and the sacraments was an inheritance from Luther. Only the context and the terminology were new.

This doctrine of the word of God, clearly a basic principle in the theology of John Gerhard, is far from the basic principles and pre-suppositions of most of modern theology. When we have discovered just how fundamental those differences are, we shall also be aware that we have much to learn from tradition on this matter. Not only does it enable us to gain a better historical understanding of the main issues in classical theology, but it also better equips us to meet the corresponding theological issues of today.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. John Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, ed. Ed. Preuss (Berlin: G. Schlawitz, 1863), locus I, 1a, p. 13. Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), p. 254ff. Bengt Häggglund, *Die Heilige Schrift und ihre Deutung in der Theologie Johann Gerhards* (Lund, 1951), p. 136ff.
2. Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, ed. Academia Regia Borusica (Berlin, 1831), 1013, 14 ff.
3. Gerhard, *op.cit.*, locus I, 42-91, pp. 30-45.
4. *Ibid.*, locus I, 50ff, pp. 32-45.

5. Balthasar Meisner, *Philosophia Sobria* (Giessen, 1615), I, sectio prima, caput III, qu. 1, 99ff. Concerning the work of Meisner see the dissertation of Walter Sparr, *Wiederkehr der Metaphysik* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1976).
6. Preus, p. 367ff. Hägglund, p. 253ff. Heinrich Halverscheid, *Lumen Spiritus Prius Quam Scriptura Intellecta - Hermann Rahtmanns Kritik am Lutherischen Schriftprincip* (Marburg, 1971). R. H. Grutzmacher, *Wort und Geist* (Leipzig, 1902).
7. *Von der Natur, Krafft und Wirckung des geoffenbarten und geschriebenen Worts Gottes in Thesauri Consiliorum et Decisionum Appendix Nova*, ed. George Dedekenn (Jena: Hertel, 1671), pp. 201-274.
8. *Jesu Christi dess Konigs aller Konige und Herrn aller Herren Gnadenreich* (1621) in Dedekenn, p. 202a.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 202a.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
11. Hägglund, p. 77ff.
12. Dedekenn, p. 204a.
13. Halverscheid, p. 154ff.
14. Dedekenn, p. 211ff.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 226ff.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 205ff., 216.
17. "Das geoffenbahrte Wort Gottes ist dem Wesen nach ein einiges Wort, es werde mit dem Munde ausgeredet, oder in ein Buch geschrieben, oder in die Taffel des Hertzens durch den H. Geist geschrieben, Prov. 7,3; Jerem. 31, 33. Es sind zwar unterschiedliche Arten der Mittheilung, aber keine wesentliche unterschiedene species des Gottlichen Worts." *Ibid.*, p. 216a.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 221ff.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 231a, 234b.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 245b.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 267ff.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 272a.
23. Another important argument is borrowed from the Wittenberg philosopher Jacob Werenberg: There is a difference between the logic of Aristotle and theology in their relation to the external word. The former is not bound to the writings of Aristotle, for one can with his own mind discover the principles of logic. The mysteries of faith, however, are unknowable to the human mind unless revealed by the Holy Ghost through the mouth of the prophets and apostles. *Ibid.*, p. 273a.