THE ILLOCUTIONARY LOGOS AS LINK BETWEEN
EPISTEMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY (CHRISTOLOGY)

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE SEMINARY AND SCHOOL OF MINISTRY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
RES7961 – BIBLE AND THEOLOGY INTEGRATIVE SEMINAR

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COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA
MAY 2013
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Introduction

For centuries Christian theologians have maintained a bifurcated theological center. Jesus Christ is the inimitable link between God and Man, and His redemptive work separates Christianity from all other religions. Nevertheless, every major Christian system inevitably turns to revelation to find its moorings, namely Scripture as the Word of God. In a pragmatic sense, the foundational nature of Scripture is only natural, for it is the only authentic account of the words and acts of Jesus Christ. However, this approach overlooks what is logically prior, and grounds Christian belief not in metaphysics (what is), but in epistemology (knowledge of what is). The danger is that what is often called theology has in fact shifted from the study of God and His ontology to the study of the Bible or bibliology. Yet, in light of God’s transcendence, is there a way for Christian theologians to right this proverbial cart before the horse?

Due to the nature of God, it is imperative that God self-reveal in order for mankind to know He exists, and thus demands that theology begin with revelation via the Word of God, in the form of Scripture, the Written Word, and Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Unfortunately, starting with revelation as the Written Word is problematic for one inevitably ends up working from lesser to greater. When Jesus Christ came down as the Living Word, He became the ultimate revelation; however, attempts to start with the Living Word have led theologians to distort the Written Word—the only record of the Living Word—and thus mankind’s understanding of God. As a result, it would seem that the "Word of God" is the nexus at which metaphysics and epistemology blur and humans can go no further.

By reviewing attempts by the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, Evangelical Churches, Protestant Neo-Orthodoxy¹ and the recent contributions of Speech Act

¹Even though Funk, Ebeling, and Fuchs (in addition to many modern liberal protestants)
theory on divine discourse to reconcile the two forms of the Word of God, this paper aims to address how the gap between mankind and the transcendent God can be bridged to allow for the proper order of metaphysics leading to epistemology without denigrating God’s Word by answering the question: is Christ as the illocution of God the essential link between ontology and epistemology, and thus the starting place for Christian systematic theology?

**The Problem: The Weaknesses of Founding Christian Systematics in Epistemology vs. Ontology (Christology)**

In echoing Genesis 1:1, John’s Prologue (John 1:1) clearly designates that God should be number one on Christianity’s metaphysical list of what exists and what those existing things are like: “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Then God created the universe *ex nihilo*, from nothing, because there was nothing besides God. As a result, creation is outside God.² So how can mankind, bound as part of creation, obtain knowledge of a being who, other than His immanent presence to uphold or sustain His creation, is wholly transcendent? Without going into whether God is a “necessary being” (or other philosophical proofs from apologetics) it would seem then, that mankind has no recourse save that God Himself bridge the gap.

Christianity, along with the Abrahamic religions, claims that God did choose to self-

² Since Pantheism and Panentheism deny the doctrines of God’s aseity—that God has always existed and only God has always existed—and God’s incorporeality—that God is Spirit, they will not be considered.
reveal through the act of speech. Many religions claim sacred texts, but Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all hold the particular view that their sacred scriptures originate not with humans, but are the very word, self-revelation, of God. Even creation itself, considered General Revelation since the world bears God’s fingerprints (Romans 1:19-20), is a work of His Word. Since revelation through speech implies communication, and the very act of communication carries connotations about the speaker/revealer, God’s speech is “agent self-revelation” as opposed to “manifest revelation.”3 This is precisely where Christianity and the Abrahamic religions claim authority for their texts. Even preeminent Evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry begins his fifteen theses with the “Supernatural Initiative” in which "revelation is a divinely initiated activity, God's free communication by which he alone turns his personal privacy into a deliberate disclosure of his reality.”4 Yet here lies the problem, since God’s being (ontology) is beyond normal human experience, then there is no way of knowing that God actually exists on the metaphysical list unless He self-reveals, but this, by definition, is epistemology. Speech alone is an impasse.

Christianity, however, overcomes this problem with the addition of manifestational revelation. God literally bridged the gap between the transcendent and mankind by coming down to dwell among humans in the flesh as Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. As if the Incarnation itself was not scandalous enough, Jesus Christ preached not a replacement of previous revelation, but fulfillment, and this fulfillment was inherent within Himself. According to Kittel, Jesus “did not merely proclaim, but is, the telos [goal/end result] of the Law (Rom


10:4).” Put another way, Jesus Christ claimed to speak the word of God and to be the Word of God.\(^5\) Christianity is completely unique in this regard, as Carl F. H. Henry notes, for while Muhammad recited the Word of God, he never claimed that the Word came from himself or to be the Word itself.\(^6\) After His death and resurrection, Christ commissioned His followers to be His witnesses, in which they were to preach the Word of God “that is, of the revealed truth of the Gospel centering in the incarnate, crucified and risen Logos.”\(^7\)

Hence, the motif of the Word of God is central to God's self-revelation via Scripture, the Written Word, and its embodiment in Jesus Christ, the Living Word; however, it is the relationship between the two that vexes the Church as various theories and approaches have been submitted over the centuries to explain how the two interrelate.

### The Deficiencies and Promise of Various Systems of Theology for Solving the Problem

**The Revealed Logos**

Since the “Word of God” concept is clearly integral to revelation, but used in multiple related ways, a little background on the Hebrew and Greek terms for “word” and their various usages will help to explain the Christian meaning.

The Old Testament puts considerable emphasis on speech, and the Hebrew words *amar* and *nāšē* are used in a similar fashion to denote speech or words. However, when we come to the New Testament, the Greek word *λέγω* is used to denote speech or words, but also to mean to say or to teach. This is a significant difference, as it implies that the Word of God is not just a spoken word, but also a teaching or a declaration.

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\(^7\) Ibid., 78.
“to speak” and *dabar* (דָּבַר) “word” play key roles. While *amar* carries an indefinite sense (i.e. sayings and expressions), *dabar* is regarded as the “definite content or meaning of a word” (hence its alternative translation “thing”) with two main elements: first, a “dionoetic” element containing a thought or true meaning of a thing (epistemology) and second, a “dynamic” element or manifest power felt during reception or internalization (metaphysics). The dionoetic implies the attribute of truth, and the dynamic “a heavenly force which creatively accomplishes its work on earth.” This force is the power that created the world and drove prophecy to result in the revelation of the Law. Thus, the Word was seen as standing in heaven and the sum of the Word is Truth.

In Greek culture, the Greek term *logos* (λόγος) has a long history of meaning due to its adoption by philosophers to include: “word, speech, utterance, revelation”; “metaphysical reality”; and then, by extension, personified as “a cosmological entity” or god. The *logos* concept served as the convergence of “thought, word, matter, nature, being and nom.” In short, the term is “symbolic of the Greek understanding of the world and existence.” The basic consensus is that *logos* has two primary meanings which refer to first inward thought, and second

8. The prominent “Promise Theme” in OT Theology is built on the notion of speech.


12. Ibid., 77.
the outward expression of inward thought through speech. Philo attempted to synthesize Judaism and Greek philosophy, relying extensively on the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the Septuagint (LXX), which often translated *amar* and *dabar* as *logos*. Philo mythologized *logos* in a way that was neither Greek nor Jewish to create a form of divine reason or intelligence that is not God Himself, but the work of God, or a begotten god that mediates between God and mankind in the form of a High Priest.

While many parallels exist between the two terms, including the root of truth and a real power that emanates to and through the world, Hermann Kleinknecht notes that the Greek concept was possibly derived from the Hebrew *dabar*. This said, most scholars in Old Testament studies follow Philo, looking for a Greek understanding of *logos* resident in Hebrew thought. Many see the Greek notion of divine reason or intelligence in passages from the Wisdom Literature, especially Psalm 104 and Proverbs 8:22-31 which personify wisdom. Yet despite these enticing parallels, a one-to-one correlation between *dabar* and *logos* is impossible as Kleinknecht clarifies, “for the Greeks logos is very different from an address or a word of creative power,” which lies at the root of *dabar*. The correlation of the two terms might have been seen as nothing more than a keen translation choice had not Philo first theologized *logos*

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14 Kleinknecht. “*λέγω*: The Logos in the Greek and Hellenistic World,” 89.

15 Ibid., 93.

16 Historical evidence shows devout Jews used another Hebrew word (“Memra”) as a euphemism to avoid naming God, but scholars such as C.K. Barrett consider this a dead end.

17 Kleinknecht. “*λέγω*: The Logos in the Greek and Hellenistic World,” 79.

18 The LXX uses *legw* (*λέγω* the root of *λόγος*) to depict God’s creating through speech.
and John later applied *logos* to Christ in the Prologue to his gospel.

Both *dabar* and *logos* are terms that capture both metaphysical and epistemological meaning, so commentators disagree whether John had Hebrew or Greek thought in mind when he applied *logos* to Christ. Likewise, New Testament usages adhere to and deviate from both. Unlike Hebrew thought which saw creative power as a force, this *logos* is personal. Again, the words of Christ are laden with authority to reveal God’s true Law, but unlike the Hebrew prophets the Word is never imparted to Him—the Father confirms instead of commissioning the Son.¹⁹ The Word that Jesus preaches and commissions to His disciples subordinates the old Word, the Law, to the new Word, Himself. Unlike Greek thought that sought to "uncloth" the soul,²⁰ the Logos was personified by literally becoming flesh. The use of *logos* in the New Testament is never a formal or conceptual one as in Greek thought,²¹ instead it always refers to the spoken word, and most decisively in Jesus Christ as “the event which has taken place, and in which God declares Himself, causing His word to be enacted.”²² Yet, John sees Christ the *logos* as more than a mere speaker of divine words (epistemology), but Christ the Logos as pre-existent being (metaphysics). Thus, John’s *logos* is not the result of reflection or “theological invention,” but his encounter with “the one and only logos which was in the beginning, which is neither speculation on an indefinite intermediary nor the metaphysical speculation of a mythical concept,

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²² Ibid., 125.
but the person manifested in Jesus, and in Him the Word.” This manifestation of the *logos* truly becomes “a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles [Greeks]” (1 Corinthians 1:23) since “the *logos* becoming flesh” runs completely contradictory to Hebrew and Greek thought. Christ then is central as Westcott captures the theological implications of John’s rooting of the Logos in God’s being:

> This revelation is the foundation of the whole Gospel of St. John. It sets aside the false notion that the Word became ‘personal’ first at the time of Creation or at the Incarnation. The absolute, eternal, immanent relations of the Persons of the Godhead furnish the basis for revelation. Because the Word was personally distinct from ‘God' and yet essentially ‘God,’ He could make Him known.  

Eastern Orthodox

*Overview*

In the Eastern Orthodox Church the title “The Word” is preferred for the second person of the Trinity over “The Son” (or any other name) and their liturgy begins with the Gospel of John (especially the prologue). At the same time, Biblical revelation is called “the Logos” which illuminates and influences the Orthodox Church. In the words of Eastern Orthodox monk Lev Gillet, “[Greek] Orthodoxy presents a classical landscape bathed in the light of the Logos.” As such, Eastern Orthodox theology begins with the Written Word and Church Tradition, as handed

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23 Ibid., 134.


down by the Church Fathers, as the sources of Christian Doctrine. Esteemed Russian theologian Michael Pomazansky cites St. Dionysius of Alexandra (a disciple of Origin) at length to distinguish the Living Word from the Father, the universal intelligence, just as a word is the son of a thought: 28 “the intelligence is as it were the father of the word, existing in itself, while the word is as it were the son of the intelligence, having its origin, not of course before the latter, nor yet concurrently with it from some external source, but by springing out of it.” 29 While an oversimplification, it might be said that God the Father is the internal Logos or universal intelligence and the Living Word is the external manifestation of the universal intelligence.

In this way, the relation of the Living Word to the Written Word is seen through the lens of the original two meaning Greek understanding of the term logos where the Living Word eternally existed within the Godhead as God’s wisdom (logos endiathetos), but was externalized as incarnate speech just as the Written Word is God’s wisdom externalized through the Holy Spirit in uttered human language (logos prophorikos). Thus, the Eastern Orthodox see how the Logos begins as divine wisdom (ontologically part of God’s being) and then becomes knowable to humans when uttered (epistemology). This process is clear with the Written Word, since it is said to primarily deal with the works of Christ; however, the Eastern Orthodox are quick to point out that this process is a mystery with the Living Word in order to maintain that the person of Christ was made known without being uttered (and therefore created). 30

28 Pomazansky, Michael. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology. 85-86.


30 Pomazansky, Michael. Orthodox Dogmatic Theology. 176.
Critique

While the centrality of the Logos in the Eastern Orthodox Church is the appropriate conclusion, three of the means to arrive there raise additional questions. First, Hellenistic Greek thought seems to act as the overarching hermeneutical principle. Interpretations of the Written Word often feel like an apologetic for a Hellenistic worldview where Greek philosophy and culture take precedence (Old Testament citations are even taken from the LXX instead of Hebrew texts). This renders uncertain whether the centrality of the Logos is derived from the Living Word or is imported from Greek thought. One Eastern Orthodox primer equates the Jewish concept of Messiah with the Greek concept of Logos, saying that the author of John sought to integrate Greek thought and Christianity. The Evangelist is said to have adopted the Greek concept of the Logos as a cultural contextualization move so that Greek seekers would not have to “be led through Jewish Messianic ideas and ways of thinking.” 31 While Philo’s original Greek understanding of the Logos is helpful in understanding John’s usage of the term, equating the Hebrew concept of the Messiah and the Greek concept of the Logos is strongly critiqued by most scholars. Westcott comments that the two usages are flatly incongruent, and that Philo and John both happened to find that the current term logos served their purposes to explain divine reality, which were widely divergent. Philo saw the Logos through Greek Philosophy as the divine intelligence in relation to the cosmos and John saw the Logos through Monotheistic Judaism “as the revealer of God to man, through creation, through theophanies, through prophets, [and] through the Incarnation.” 32

Second, the two-part Greek understanding of logos, while fitting for the Written Word,

31 Constantelos, Demetrios J. Understanding the Greek Orthodox Church. 47-48.

hits a snag with the Living Word. Uttering an inner thought as a word implies creation of a sort and therefore a time before the divine thought uttered Christ. At best this unbalances the Immanent Trinity, and at worst recreates the heresy of Arius. Finally, the Eastern Orthodox Church readily embraces mystery in order to maintain both the Greek understanding of *logos* and that the Living Word is unuttered. Such a position usually does not sit well with post-enlightenment scholars and is often seen as a form of theological dodge.

The position of the Eastern Orthodox Church nonetheless provides some crucial aspects that must be maintained in any understanding of the Logos. The emphasis on Greek culture keeps other scholars honest about the Greek Hellenistic influence behind the term *logos*. Therefore, the twofold definition cannot simply be done away with; it must somehow be reconciled with biblical Christology. The most crucial takeaway is almost certainly the Eastern Orthodox Church’s acknowledgement that when confronting the nature of the transcendent Godhead, humans will inevitably be left with mystery.

Roman Catholic

*Overview*

The Roman Catholic Church likewise has an extensive history on the Logos as both the second person of the Trinity and Scripture. In contrast to the Eastern Orthodox Church, Catholic thought sees the term *logos* as consecrated from its original Greek usage by means of St. John's adoption. Historically, the topic led to a debate on the nature of Christ as an utterance of God and the influence of the Stoic teaching that distinguished between an innate word and an uttered word (which was effectively tabled by St. Irenaeus until after the Council of Nicea). Much of

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33 J. Lebreton “LOGOS, The,” in Vol. IX of *The Catholic encyclopedia: an international*
the literature on the topic focuses on Christ's nature and position in the Trinity, such that even the works of the Ancient Fathers are both affirmed and denied, maintaining that “the orthodoxy of the Apologists is irreproachable: the Word was not created, as the Arians held later, but was born of the very Substance of the Father according to the later definition of Nicae,” but that “their theology is less satisfactory as regard the eternity of this generation and its necessity; in fact, they represent the Word as uttered by the Father when the Father wished to create and in view of this creation.” Thus, the influence of the Logos in the New Testament is distinguished from Philo's Stoic use, differentiating between intermediary and mediator.  

St. Thomas Aquinas, relying heavily on St. Augustine, wrote extensively on this subject as he sought to explain the Trinity in the analogy of human speech. With the Written Word as his starting place, he works toward the divine by drawing out the logical progression of what is called a word, “according to the imposition of the name,” based on human experience. A written word is a symbol that represents the vocal word, which represents the interior word (unspoken but modeled upon an exterior word), which finally represents the word of the heart, which is “uttered but not vocalized.” It is this word of the heart that is a word in the truest sense since it is “the efficient and final cause of the exterior [word]” and thus becomes the basis for Aquinas's metaphor for understanding Christ as the Word. God the Father is analogized to the mind, and Christ as the results (known as “generation” not “utterance”) of that mind (the Spirit is the love

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34Ibid., 329-330.
between the two). In this way “the Father contemplates Himself eternally and generates in the divine mind a perfect idea or word or image of Himself, just as when a person conceives in the mind an idea that is identical in nature with the mind. Hence the Son can be said to be the Word, Wisdom, the Image of God.” In reversing the analogy, the Written Word is the expression of God's word of the heart as a vocal word recorded as text.

Critique

Aquinas and the Roman Catholic Church have expressed that the Living Word, as part of the Trinity, ought to logically precede Scripture, going so far as to say that “the scriptural perspective [of Logos] was one of transient or functional interpersonalism.” How this affirmation pans out in structuring theological doctrine is more difficult to assess since the Written Word still precedes the Living Word in modern Systematics. Furthermore, this long affirmed Scholastic position has been deemed unsatisfactory in contemporary Catholic theology by scholars such as Karl Rahner, believing that it creates division in the Godhead by emphasizing the Immanent Trinity at the loss of the Economic Trinity (effectively creating a unitarian position).

Despite these critiques, there is still value in the scholastic argument of Aquinas since it

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35 Aquinas, Thomas. *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate, 4.1*


38 The recent “Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives” by Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin begins with revelation following its Prolegomena.

stood for centuries having grasped the nature of the Logos concept while satisfying both the Greek background of the term and the Christological understanding of the Nicene Creed. Consequently, Aquinas proved that analogy can go a long way in assisting theologians in determining what the Triune God is like while acknowledging the mystery of the Godhead; however, analogical language ultimately fails to deliver any substantive knowledge about God.

In order to go beyond mere analogy, another language theory is needed.

Evangelical

Overview

Evangelical theologians may hold the widest variety of views on the relationship between the Written Word and the Living Word, but unity generally exists on the inerrancy of both. Major Evangelical theologies begin with the Written Word since its purpose is to reveal “the mind and voice of the incarnate and risen Christ in intelligible propositional form,” that is the Living Word. Evangelical’s find in the Written Word a doctrine of the Logos that echoes the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church, but with a revelatory role coinciding with the works of Christ (pre-incarnate light/Truth, incarnational ministry, ongoing presence in the Church, and second coming). Millard Erikson summarizes this union nicely as “[Christ’s]

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41 The Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) requires members to affirm that “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs”, but some institutions, such as Fuller Theological Seminary, self-designate as Evangelical and maintain the Written Word is “infallible” instead of an “inerrant.”


43 Erickson, Millard J. Christian Theology. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House,
work as revealer cannot be split from his work as ruler and reconciler. In other words, the epistemological function of the Living Word cannot be separated from His ontological roles. As a result, Carl F. H. Henry sees one of the roles of the eternal Logos, whether preexistent, incarnate, or now glorified, as that of mediating agent in all divine revelation. Erikson notes that even the Incarnation is considered mediated (although the most complete mode of revelation), because God is spirit and therefore “Christ's humanity must represent a mediation of the divine revelation.” Thus, the Living Word acts as the mode that expresses divine revelation.

Special Revelation is thus split into the personal Living Word and the propositional Written Word, in which the Living Word takes on the role of mode or channel through which divine propositions are given. Thus, the Evangelical stance on the inerrancy of the Written Word is rooted in the Christology of the Living Word. The two are seen to go “hand-in-hand,” since the Living Word mediated and, during the incarnation period, literally spoke the Written Word. In fact, many Evangelicals call on the Living Word's equally divine and human nature (the hypostatic union) as the analogous basis for the Written Word’s equally divine and human words. Thus, to find any error in the Written Word is to find error in the Living Word.

1998. 782-784.

Ibid., 786.


Erickson, Millard J. Christian Theology. 215.


Ibid., 384.

Ibid., 259.
Critique

The Evangelical defense of the inerrancy of the Word of God is a crucial endeavor, but has the potential of shifting the focus from the Living Word to the Written Word by placing such emphasis on the truthfulness of the Written Word that the personal event of the Living Word is eclipsed. Geisler notes that Jesus Himself warned against this error (John 5:39-40) and that “overemphasis on the Written Word, without stressing its purpose to convey the Living Word (Christ), has indeed led to some outlandish conservative views that make the Word of God the object of their study rather than the God of the Word.”

It would seem that in the rush to affirm inerrancy, Christ is almost affirmed as the mediator only as a means to an end (and one that often neglects the role of the Holy Spirit). At best this often leads to the charge of circular reasoning:

(a) the Bible claims Jesus is inerrant
(b) Jesus mediated the Bible
(c) the Bible is inerrant

At worst, Evangelicals run the risk of slipping into bibliolatry if their focus on the propositions of the Written Word supersedes their focus on the person of the Living Word.

As a result, the historical stance that the Written Word is propositional while the Living

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53 This line of reason brings clarity to the dawn of Liberal Protestantism, since once evidence from the Historical Critical Method called the inerrancy of the Written Word into question, then the sinlessness, and by extension the divine nature, of the Living Word was called into question as well.

Word is Personal (Event/Act) is an unhelpful distinction. Many have begun to push back on the quest for epistemological certainty since the Written Word “is not a collection of timeless truths that can be ether withdrawn or left on deposit” (what Karl Barth called the “paper pope”), since even if it were, the absolute truths that lie therein would still have to be interpreted.\(^{55}\) In the end, even the dual nature analogy between the Written Word and the Living Word does little to explain the relationship between the two. Instead, it primarily shows theologically how dual authorship is possible. Evangelicals such as Kevin VanHoozer, have even suggested that the model (which he dubs the “hypophatic union”) has outlived its usefulness.\(^{56}\) Furthermore, new language theories, like Speech Act theory, find the Written Word to be both propositional and personal while maintaining inerrancy,\(^{57}\) which allows the Living Word to likewise be seen as both personal and propositional.

Evangelicals rightly maintain the conclusion that the Written Word, including the propositions it contains, is inerrant. Likewise, since the Gospel necessitates a relationship with God, additional stress on the Living Word as personal is warranted. Problems arise when the two are seen as totally dichotomous. However, a pertinent takeaway for the reordering of metaphysics and epistemology is the concept of the Logos as sole mediator of revelation.


Protestant Neo-Orthodoxy

*Overview*

In *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth earnestly sets forth an approach with Christ as the Word before all else. Contrary to Erikson, he concludes that the Living Word is not just a mediator, but the ultimate form of revelation, asking the question: “Who but God could or would reveal God?”

Barth still holds that God is the source of the Written Word, but not as revelation, since it is merely a unique hearing, or record, of God’s revelation in Christ and therefore not the true Word of God. Thus, for Barth, the only link between the Living Word and the Written Word is an imperfect reference back to Christ, like an unclear memory, with human words merely witnessing to revelation.

This leads to the infamous threefold Word of God, with the Living Word as the true Word of God and the Written Word and Gospel preaching as the Word of God in a secondary and tertiary sense since they merely point to the Living Word. Also, Barth’s separation of salvation history (Geschichte) from natural history (Historie) puts a unique Christological spin on revelation, in which the Written Word becomes the Word of God again when it acts as an instrument to foster a personal encounter with the Living Word. As a result, Barth claims that God does not reveal Himself in words but in events.

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58 Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. (IV/3.2, 412).

59 Ibid., (I/1, 115).

60 Ibid., (I/2, 513, 583).

61 Ibid., (I/2, 463).


63 Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. (I/2, 223, 527).
Barth’s theology allowed him to embrace the full academic rigor of the Historical Criticism Method since the Written Word consists of mere human words, but push back against the German scholarship of his day enough to maintain his traditional faith in God and the purpose of the Written Word (albeit with an Existential bent). As a result, Wolterstof concludes that maintaining this balance is why Barth refused to see revelation in any form of human speech since that would require inerrancy and thus compromise the freedom of God.64

_Critique_

Barth accomplished founding his systematic in the ontology of the Living Word, and thus the Godhead, but at the cost of divorcing and denigrating the Written Word in order to do so. Orthodox Christians such as Geisler note that this move is not only biblically and historically unsupported, but creates philosophical and Christological inconsistencies that are illogical and unfruitful.65 The most pertinent inconsistencies include: the notion that the Living Word is able to enter human history, yet unable to enter human language; and that human and divine words can be attributed to the Living Word, but not to the Written Word even though when Jesus speaks Scripture “Barth's distinction evaporates.”66,67

Barth’s theory of language also creates problems and inconsistencies for understanding God. Wolterstorff notes that Barth’s view on God’s speaking results in even “more speaking”}

64 Wolterstorff, Nicholas. _Divine Discourse_. 73-74.


66 Ibid., 383-384.

since Christ as God’s Word must act on humans through a secondary form of God’s Word in an event where God speaks again. Even more interesting is how Barth can reject the propositional aspect of the Written Word, and yet still arrive at its propositional claims including the finely balanced Godhead.

Neo-orthodoxy has no shortage of critics, but despite its failings the unique perspective may be a blessing in disguise as it illumines some of Christendom's blind spots. By rejecting mechanical dictation, elevating God's revelation through His acts, and pointing out the necessity of illumination when working with the Scripture, Barth rejects any notion of bibliolatry. The key insight from Barth is his centrality of the Living Word as the second member of the Trinity in Systematics, and subsequently the need for a personal encounter with Him.

**Essential Insights of Speech Act Theory and their Contribution to Solving the Problem**

**A Brief Introduction to Speech Act Theory**

In linguistics, Speech Act theory is a philosophy of language introduced by J. L. Austin and influenced by John Searle, which proposes that speech is not just a vehicle for propositions, but an utterance that performs actions. In his original lectures *How to Do Things with Words* delivered at Harvard University in 1955, Austin illustrated that the identity of the speaker and the intentions of the speaker are more important to meaning than the actual word spoken as they

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meet necessary conditions (or else fail to achieve the speakers intended goal).\textsuperscript{71}

Understanding how these necessary conditions are met depends upon the three levels within speech: the locution, illocution, and perlocution. The locutionary act includes the actual utterance whether written, spoken, or signaled and its apparent meaning. The illocutionary act (synonymous with “speech act” itself) includes the conventional force or intended significance within a specific context.\textsuperscript{72} The perlocutionary act occurs in certain cases to include the results or the actual effect of the utterance and its illocutionary force, whether intended or not.\textsuperscript{73,74}

As everyday speech shows, the power and often true meaning, of an utterance lies in the illocutionary act. Simple locutionary acts such as “Jason!” can qualify as a parent commanding a child to sit down, or “Me!” as a volunteer’s promise to join the prayer team. John Searle gives the following utterances as having the same propositional content or locutionary act: “Sam smokes habitually,” “Does Sam smoke habitually?,” “Sam, smoke habitually!” and “Would that


\textsuperscript{72}Various kinds of illocutionary acts have been proposed, but philosopher John Searle’s are generally accepted: assertives (committing to the truth of a proposition, e.g. confessions), directives (instructions to the hearer, e.g. commands), commissives (committing to future action, e.g. promises), expressives (expressed attitude or emotion of speaker, e.g. congratulations), and declarations (alter status or reality, e.g. wedding pronouncements). See: Searle, John R. (1975), “A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts”, in: Gunderson, Keith. \textit{Language, Mind, and Knowledge}. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975. 344-69.

\textsuperscript{73}Austin, J. L. \textit{How to Do Things with Words}. 109.

\textsuperscript{74}Indirect speech acts, which appear to be non-sequitur locutionary acts in a conversation that still communicates through the illocutionary force derived from the conversational background, have also had impact on religious language. See Searle, John R., and Daniel Vanderveken. \textit{Foundations of Illocutionary Logic}. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1985.75.
Sam smoked habitually!” What differs is their illocutionary force.\textsuperscript{75} As a result, Speech Act theory sees all communication as the speaker trying to do something, and thus the smallest unit of communication is not a symbol, word, or sentence, but a speech act.\textsuperscript{76} As the basic building block of communication, the speech act, or illocutionary force, serves as the center or binding agent of all utterances and the speaker’s will to accomplish something.

**Speech Act Theory and The Written Word**

Biblical scholars have applied Speech Act theory to the Written Word and hermeneutics\textsuperscript{77} with Kevin Vanhoozer and Anthony Thiselton proposing that the Written Word is a collection of speech acts made by humans and God to create one Word of God with a unified purpose or “constitutional framework” of covenant.\textsuperscript{78,79,80} The Written Word as a covenant between God and humans then consists of the commitments and effects which Thiselton claims “lie near the heart of what the Bible is all about,” which God employs through speech acts including: “acts of promise, acts of blessing, acts of forgiveness, acts of pronouncing judgment, acts of repentance,

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  \item \textsuperscript{76}Searle, John R. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{77}Two notable scholars include Hugh C. White in O.T. and John Paul Heil in N.T.
  \item \textsuperscript{78}Vanhoozer, Kevin J. 1994. “God’s mighty speech-acts”. 173.
  \item \textsuperscript{80}The Written Word is seen as a compilation of many different works comprising different genres which determine the illocutionary force of each book. Vanhoozer notes that the role of Biblical Criticism will be to explore the nature of the biblical genres (*God’s Mighty Speech-Acts*, 173). Similarly, Thiselton sees Speech-Act theory as transformational, but not as a “comprehensive paradigm” for all biblical texts (*New Horizons*, 32-33).
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acts of worship, acts of authorization, acts of communion, and acts of love.”\textsuperscript{81}

The necessary conditions built into Speech Act theory for the Written Word include the hearer (humankind) and the speaker (God), in a process known as “self-involvement.” For the hearers, all of the Written Word is addressed to them, since instead of listening to a string of propositions about the past, the hearers are involved, or have invested interest in the words due to the logical result of what is being said about the past. Through the illocutionary force of words even in narrative, hearers can be “appointed in a role” or “given a particular status.”\textsuperscript{82} For the speaker, theological ramifications emerge in light of what necessary conditions are being met for speech acts made by God or Christ. This is most clear in the Synoptic Gospels where the word of Jesus is constantly shown to perform an act, such as: heal sickness (Matthew 8:13), cast out demons (Luke 4:35), and forgive sins (Mark 2:5). Speaking of yet another account, where Jesus stilled a storm with only His word, Thiselton concludes that the Synoptics operate on this key idea behind speech acts, saying “Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all make room for the reader to reflect on the presuppositions which allow the exercitive [illocutionary force] to function effectively: ‘Who then, is this...that even the winds and sea obey him?’”\textsuperscript{83}

In many ways, the concepts espoused by Speech-Act theory are implicit in the Written Word. To name two: God identifies Himself in His speech and His acts, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 20:2); and the Israelites reciting the Shema is clearly both speech and act. Pamela Eisenbaum even argues that proclaiming the

\begin{footnotes}
  \item[81] Thiselton, Anthony C. \textit{New Horizons in Hermeneutics}. 17-18.
  \item[82] Ibid., 274. Italics his.
  \item[83] Ibid., 286.
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confession of faith in Romans 10:9 “[has] the power to effect salvation,”\textsuperscript{84} due to the two illocutions within the confession.\textsuperscript{85} In other words, a believer is not merely reciting words (the locution) but expressing faith in the truth claim of the Gospel (the illocution).\textsuperscript{86}

Thus, Speech Act theory better allows theologians to account for revelation found in the Written Word by: first, escaping the weaknesses of both metaphorical and univocal language; second, combating existential (or “reader response”) hermeneutics (since illocutionary force depends on the speaker’s intentions);\textsuperscript{87,88} and third, enabling the Written Word to be understood as both propositional and personal (act/event). To use David Clark’s words, Speech Act theory allows theologians to go beyond “a single-minded focus on objective truth” to create room for experiencing the “formational functions of Scripture”\textsuperscript{89} and connect with God.

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\textsuperscript{85}The two illocutions: First “the formula is a name” which “distinguishes the God who raised Jesus from other gods, and it redefines God by a new salvific act as opposed to previous acts like the exodus. Second, the formula is a condition used in asserting God’s power to resurrect the believer” (italics hers) (Ibid. 40).
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\textsuperscript{86}Ibid., 40.
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\textsuperscript{87}Thiselton also notes another benefit from “self-involvement”: defense against Bultmannian existentialism since “speech-act theory offers a more balanced and less one-sided model of self-involvement than existential interpretation” (Ibid. 24).
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Speech Act Theory and God Speaking

In *Divine Discourse*, Nicholas Wolterstorff takes Speech Act theory further to directly address the notion that God speaks. He is more concerned with discerning what God is saying in the Written Word than the more comfortable academic practice of discerning the literary qualities of the text or discerning the theology of the biblical writers. A foundation for his theory is that speaking does not equal revealing, or when applied to God as speaker, divine discourse is not divine revelation. Indeed, the Written Word alludes to the fact that God engages in dialogue that humans may or may not be privy to (Job 1:6-12; 1 Kings 22:19-22; John 12:49). Thus, Wolterstorff argues that since revelation only occurs when “ignorance is dispelled” then one, whether human or divine, can speak without revealing. Hence, if the Written Word is the speech of God, then it cannot categorically be labeled “revelation.” It must be something more.

To maintain that the Written Word is both the speech of a human and a divine author, Wolterstorff introduces the concept of “double agency discourse” to show how one document can have more than one agent. Humans are the agents behind individual books with their unique writing styles and theological understandings, using their own illocutionary acts, and God is the agent behind appropriating the discourse written by the human agents. The result is that

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91Ibid., 19.

92Ibid., 23, 35.

93This phenomenon of “authorization,” where a speaker authorizes the text, or “does one thing or another to the text such that her doing that counts as her performing some illocutionary acts, with the consequences that the text becomes the medium for those illocutionary acts” (Ibid., 41), takes many forms depending on biblical genre and type of speech (i.e. prophecy) (Ibid., 45).

94Ibid., 54.
the Written Word contains the illocutionary acts from human speakers which match the illocutionary acts God wishes to communicate (even if the words were technically prepared by a secondary agent). The critical factor is the appropriated illocution, which maintains that the Written Word is both the words of humans and God.

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**Vanhoozer’s Triune Discourse Model as a Framework for Building a Case to Found Christian Systematics in Ontology (Christology)**

To close the gap between the Written Word and the Living Word, Kevin Vanhoozer applies Speech Act theory to God by merging the best of Barth’s rich Trinitarian approach with Wolterstorff’s robust philosophy of language in his article *Triune Discourse*. He concurs with Wolterstorff that the Written Word is too big for just revelation, but replaces the nondescript notion of “God” speaking with the Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to arrive at God’s being in conversation as different speakers (Immanent Trinity) since God has been in relationship and conversation since eternity past. Based on what is revealed in the Written Word, Vanhoozer proposes the “rhetorical analogy,” which sees the Trinity as: the Father who initiates by speaking, the Son who is the content or self-revelation itself, and the Spirit who completes the communication by carrying it (as the "channel" or “air”) to the hearer. By extension, each member is said to adopt a rhetorical function (Economic Trinity): the Father appropriates the ethos since it pertains to the speaker’s moral character; the Son appropriates the logos since it is the form and content of the message itself, and the Spirit appropriates the pathos since it is the

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95Ibid., 38-41.


97Ibid., 54.
result produced on the recipient. These roles thus translate into the concepts of Speech Act theory: the Father’s activity is locution or the actual words spoken; the Son’s activity is the illocution since the illocution is the content and the force that gives the intent of the locution; and the Spirit’s activity is perlocution through illuminating and convicting the hearer regarding the illocution. Therefore, the three effectuate these different roles in all God speaks.

Thus, when the Godhead speaks the Written Word through Inspiration (the act of the Holy Spirit “catching up” the prophets and Apostles into the act of Triune discourse), the content, or Logos, of the Written Word as Triune Discourse is the Living Word. In the words of Vanhoozer, “the Father communicates the wisdom embodied in his Son to the authors of Scripture through the Holy Spirit and eventually to its readers as well.” Since God chose to reveal through speech, Vanhoozer concludes that the Trinity should be the theologian’s “scripture principle.” Here the jump from epistemology to metaphysics is achieved, since the speech acts of God are Triune Discourse (God’s ontology) and not revelation (epistemology).

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98 Ibid., 61-62.


100 Vanhoozer, Kevin J. “Triune discourse (part 2)”. 59.

101 Vanhoozer shows that the analogy of God’s being in Speech-Act is not only congruent with the Written Word, but also the patristic indivisibility of God's works and Calvin’s account of the division of labor within the Trinity (Ibid., 61).

102 The Written Word is thus authored by the Holy Spirit (who speaks on behalf of all three persons of the Trinity) through the divine appropriation of human authors who were inspired by the Holy Spirit to experience the Logos as they wrote (Ibid. 67).

103 Ibid., 76.
Support from the Teaching of Scripture for such a Starting Point and Relationship

Does the Written Word support the claim that it is unified by the illocutionary Logos of the Living Word? Is Vanhoozer’s claim that “the voice or logos the church hears in and through the human words [of the Written Word] is the voice of the third person of the Trinity speaking from the Father through and about the Son” biblical? The Written Word does refer to the Living Word by the title “Word of God,” but there are only two references (John 1:1-14 and Revelation 19:13) and two allusions (1 John 1:1-3 and Hebrews 1:1-4). That said, Kittel claims that the primitive church, as it reflected on the Logos, saw an awareness of this role in other passages sprinkled throughout the New Testament, such as Colossians 1:25-27 (Christ the Word of God “the mystery hidden for ages”), Luke 1:2 (“eyewitnesses and ministers of the word”), and Acts 6:2 (“preaching [Christ] the word of God”), that “preaching of what has taken place in the person of Jesus is the preaching of the Word, and that reception of the Word implies faith in Jesus.”

Even more foundational, the Written Word itself points to the primacy of the Living Word, by showing that Christ made statements aligning Himself with the wisdom, or Logos, of God. He claimed to be Truth itself (John 14:6) even explaining to Pilate that His purpose for coming to the world was “to bear witness to the truth” and that “everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice” (John 18:37). Paul echoes this claim in Romans 9:1, claiming to speak the Truth in Christ. Thus, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had no qualms claiming that Christ is the hidden center of not only the Written Word, but even the academic university since it seeks veritas

104 Ibid., 67.
(despite the fact that secular philosophers still debate over what “truth” is).\textsuperscript{106} What is more, Christ claimed to be the Way in addition to being Truth, such that “no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). This truth applies even to the Written Word since it has no power to save, instead it attests to the only one who has the power to save, the Living Word, for knowledge of God is not salvation through knowledge.

What then of the Written Word? Should the Living Word replace the Written Word? By no means! That would take theologians back to Neo-orthodoxy. The Living Word Himself claimed to fulfill the Written Word, not abolish it (Matthew 5:17). All of the Old Testament points forward to Christ and all of the New Testament points backward to Christ. The Living Word is arguably the center of the Written Word, a covenantal promise that God is true to His Word.\textsuperscript{107} Yet such an understanding entails that the Written Word must be read in light of The Living Word—its illocutionary force—in order for the intended meaning of God (the speaker) to be understood. Yet, the Written Word claims even this, that the Son exegetes the Father (John 1:18). Christ himself even set forth a Christocentric Hermeneutic in His post-resurrection appearances telling His disciples on the road to Emmaus and in the upper room that the Written Word is not only about, but is also fulfilled in the Living Word (Luke 24:27, 44–49). If the Living Word is the illocution of the Written Word, then every passage must be funneled through Him to understand its proper force and by extension, meaning. (As David Clark distinguishes in his article \textit{Beyond Inerrancy}, this is not to say that Christ can be found in every passage, but that every passage must at least bestow the necessary conditions in order for the Living Word to be

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the illocution). In this sense, the Living Word almost literally mediates, or exegetes, the revelation of the Father to mankind. Just as John Calvin referred to the Written Word as the “spectacles of faith” in order to rightly understand the world, theologians must learn to see through the Written Word to the Living Word.\(^ {109} \)

**Conclusion: An Articulation of Ontology (Christology) as the Starting Point for Systematic Theology and its Relation to Epistemology.**

Christians have built Systematics on their knowledge of God, but theologians can do better. Just as key concepts such as “good” are grounded in God's ontology (i.e., anything which aligns with the nature/character of God) instead of knowledge of good, theology can and ought to be built on God's ontology, in metaphysics. The problem is that God is fully transcendent, so humans require revelation, which God gave by speaking the Word of God. Christ claimed to be the Word of God, the Living Word, but He is no longer present physically for humans to experience Him tangibly. Thus, God gave the record of the Prophets, Apostles, and other witnesses who did experience Him tangibly to carry the forth the message in the Written Word. Nevertheless, Christians should not stop here. God has revealed more than what is just in the Written Word. While Creation is a form of self-revelation, there is also the fact that God speaks. In the very act of revealing Himself through His word, God sheds light on His being by taking on the aspects of a speaker.\(^ {110} \)

\(^ {108} \) Clark, *Beyond Inerrancy*, 122-125.

\(^ {109} \) Calvin, *Institutes*, bk I, ch. 6. 1.

\(^ {110} \) God regularly appears as a speaker in the Written Word. (Vanhoozer., “God's mighty speech-acts,” 171).
Since Speech Act theory shows that all communication is a speech act, then the Written Word as Triune speech act has an illocution. As shown, the Living Word is that illocution. Since the Living Word is a person (metaphysics), but also the content and force of the Written Word (epistemology), it can be concluded that He serves as the hinge between God’s Ontology and epistemology. It is this hinge, the illocutionary link of the Living Word, therefore where Christian thought should be grounded, in metaphysics (God's ontology) and not epistemology. Thus, when systematic theologies are built, the Living Word, the third member of the Trinity, should be the starting place to explain the Written Word, and not the other way around.

The Written Word will always play a vital role, for it is the main access to the illocution, where Systematics ought to begin. However, theologians must see through the Written Word to the Living Word. Metaphorically speaking it is the pair of glasses that God has given humans in order to see Him clearly for who He really is. No other pair of glasses will do, for no other pair came from God. So the Written Word is vital, so long as Christians do not lose sight of the Living Word in order to study the glasses.
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