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# Meaning and the Word in Lutheran Orthodoxy

CURTIS E. HUBER

**"The languages (Greek and Hebrew) are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored. . . ."**<sup>1</sup>

The intelligibility of this statement presupposes a distinction between what I shall call signs or terms, usually either written or uttered words, and the meaning which they communicate. That this distinction and the study of it occupied a large and significant place in the development of scholastic theology is generally recognized. What is not so well understood is the role which semantic study played in the development of Lutheran theology in the age of Orthodoxy. It is not the intent of this paper to give a complete account of the semantic labors of the Orthodox dogmaticians. My intent is far more modest. I shall attempt to show that the distinction between signs and meaning was consciously recognized and used for important purposes by John Gerhard and others. This is done by giving particular attention to their treatment and understanding of the terms "Word of God" and "Holy Scripture." By choosing these particular terms to illustrate the analytic endeavors of some Lutheran dogmaticians we can shed im-

portant light on the understanding of some attributes of Scripture. This illumination in turn, it is hoped, will go a considerable way toward helping us to recover and preserve a certain precision in our discourse about the Word of God, without which the contemporary discussion of this topic necessarily becomes both confused and confusing. The elimination of such confusion has always been a major concern of systematic theology, and it is the principal aim of this study.

## I

John Gerhard (1582—1637), who has aptly been characterized as "a quiet and reflective scholar in an age of the most violent polemics," tells us that "By the term Scripture, we are not to understand so much the external form or sign, that is, the particular letters employed," which he also calls the external symbols, ". . . as the matter itself or the thing signified, just that which is marked and represented by the writing, namely, the Word of God itself. . . ."<sup>2</sup> With these words Gerhard introduces the distinction between signs and their *signata*. The *signata* of the signs which are found in the written canonical Scriptures are said to be the Word of God itself. The *signata*, then, are those meanings which the signs have, and hence are

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany," *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 45, 360.

<sup>2</sup> John Gerhard, *Loci Theologici* (Tübingen: George Cotta, 1762—63), II, I, i, 5. References in this edition are to tome, locus, chapter, and paragraph respectively.

what the terms "Word of God" and "Holy Scripture" properly denote.

There are good reasons for making this distinction. For one thing, the *signata* of the Biblical signs, Gerhard says, can never be destroyed or perish while the signs themselves will perish.<sup>3</sup> For another, the *materia* or meaning of the Scriptures is "more ancient than the church."<sup>4</sup>

John Quenstedt (1617—1685) gives the same reason for this distinction when he writes

We must make a distinction between . . . the substance of Scripture, which is the Word of God, and its accidents, which is the writing of it. The church is prior to the Scriptures, if you regard the mere act of writing; but it is not prior to the Word of God itself, by means of which the church itself was gathered.<sup>5</sup>

Here the meaning of the Scriptural signs, the Word of God itself, is called the substance, as opposed to the accidents, of Scripture. Quenstedt also speaks of the *forma interna* (the internal form of Scripture as opposed to the external form or signs) as being the "inspired sense of Scripture" (*sensus scripturae theopneustos*) and the "understanding of the divine mind" (*conceptus divini intellectus*).

The form of Scripture is on the one hand internal and on the other hand external. The internal form or that which gives Scripture its essence (*esse*), namely that it is the Word of God, or that which constitutes and distinguishes it from any other scripture whatsoever, is the inspired sense of Scripture which in general is the understanding of the divine intellect concerning

the divine mysteries and our salvation, formed from eternity and revealed in time and communicated to us in writing, or theopneustia itself, that is, divine inspiration, II Tim. 3:16, since in this way the word is constituted divine and distinguished from human word. The external form of Scripture is the character of speech (*sermonis*) or style and idiom.<sup>6</sup>

Quenstedt goes on to indicate explicitly that insofar as the Scriptures are not perishable human words but the meaning of those words, we can speak of the *sensus divinus*, or "divine meaning," of the written words as the essence of the Scriptures.<sup>7</sup> For that reason he contrasts the external and internal meanings of the divine Word and asserts in effect that while any unregenerate person can translate the Hebrew and Greek words of the Bible and so discover its external meaning, only the illuminated mind of the regenerate man can discover the internal meaning conveyed by the original or translated Scriptural words.<sup>8</sup> Like Quenstedt, Gerhard also is not hesitant to identify the Word of God with "the thoughts in the mind" of God.<sup>9</sup>

To this point we have collected a number of semantically equivalent expressions: Word of God, Holy Scripture, *signata*, matter, inspired sense, internal form, un-

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., I, IV, i, *thesis v*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., I, IV, i, *thesis v*, n. 1. "A distinction must be made between the grammatical or external sense of the divine word and the spiritual, internal, and divine sense of the divine word. The former is the essence of the Word of God insofar as it is *word*, the latter insofar as it is *divine word*. The former can be perceived even by any unregenerate person whatever. The latter, however, is apprehended only by the illuminated intellect."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Gerhard, II, I, i, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., II, I, i, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> John Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica*, I, cap. IV, sec. ii, *quest. viii*.

derstanding of the divine intellect, substance, internal meaning, thoughts in the mind of God. Even a quick glance at this list reveals that what is intended by the dogmaticians in their use of these terms is that the proper meaning of the term "Word of God" or "Holy Scripture" is not a book of signs or a series of oral utterances, but the very thoughts in God's own mind, existing from eternity, which He communicated to men by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Since there is such a distinction it is understandable that Gerhard should repeatedly assert that these thoughts of God were "reduced to writing" (*in literas redactum*), and that the other dogmaticians should speak likewise about the Word of God being "clothed" in human words.<sup>10</sup>

Now while this is the intended meaning of "Scripture," it is obviously not the only meaning of the term for the dogmaticians. This is seen by the usage to which the term is put as well as by the explicit statements of Gerhard. Although Gerhard insists that the truly important meaning of the term denotes God's thoughts in eternity, he also wishes on occasion to include the signs in the meaning. Thus he can speak of the "inspired sense of Scripture" and use the term "Scripture" here to mean the book of signs which *has* inspired meaning. Similarly, David Hollaz (1648 to 1713) makes a semantic transition from the *meaning* of signs to the signs *themselves* when he argues that "Each and all of the words (*verba*) which are read in the Holy Manuscript were inspired by the Holy Spirit and dictated into the pen."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., II, I, iv, 52; II, I, i, 7; cf. David Hollaz, *Examen*, 87.

<sup>11</sup> Hollaz, 83—85.

The purpose of this semantic transition, confusing as it may be, was twofold: it supported the ordinary use of the term, as when we point to the Bible on the shelf and say, "Let's see what the Word of God says"; it also insured the conviction that God inspired both the thoughts in the minds of the Biblical authors and in the case of Hebrew, the very words and very vowel points, which the authors in fact used to carry the freight of meaning God revealed to them.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the dogmaticians are clear in their insistence that in the strict sense of the term "Word of God" denotes God's thoughts, or the divine meaning God intends as the signification of the Biblical signs, and not the signs themselves. And it is for this reason that they consistently speak of the Word of God as "contained" in the Bible. Such locutions serve to support the view that the distinction between signs and their meaning was uppermost in the dogmaticians' minds.

Gerhard supports the legitimacy of identifying the terms "Word of God" and "Holy Scripture" by argument. He writes, "Between the Word of God and Holy Scripture understood materially (*materialiter*) there is no real distinction. This is proved . . . by the matter of Scripture."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> That the vowel points of the Hebrew Massoretic text were used by the authors of the Old Testament corpus is of course not a fact.

<sup>13</sup> Gerhard, II, I, i, 7. The "matter" of Scripture is that which the language is about, our "subject matter." Quenstedt distinguishes matter *ex qua* and *circa quam*. He writes, "The matter from which (*ex qua*) . . . is the letters, points, syllables, words, and canonical books of both the Old and New Testaments. The matter about which (*circa quam*) or object is all the divine and sacred things comprehended in the Word of God. . . . Moreover, the nucleus, the

His point is that the matter or meaning of the Biblical signs is identical with the Word of God. This Word is God's own thought which He wishes to make known to us. Gerhard argues that there is no real distinction of meaning in these two terms also by citing the logical rule: an accident does not change the essence of a thing.

It is accidental to the Word of God whether it is proclaimed orally, or whether it is reduced to writing. It is one and the same Word of God, whether it becomes known to us by way of preaching or writing, since neither the principal efficient cause, nor the matter, nor the internal form, nor the purpose are changed; only the manner of disclosure, which consists in the method employed, varies.<sup>14</sup>

In view of such arguments, Gerhard makes the general claim that this proper meaning of the term "Word of God," viz., God's own thoughts, is to be understood by whatever other name is applied to the Scriptures.<sup>15</sup>

The foregoing analysis makes it evident that while the dogmatists felt we may speak of Scripture as a book of signs *containing* divine meaning, they also believed that it can be *identified* with the Word of God; that is, the very thoughts of His mind, but only by virtue of the divine meaning which the human signs convey. This meaning is the very substance or essence of God's revealed Word.

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marrow, and scope or center to which all things in Scripture have reference is Christ Jesus, Ps. 40:8; Jn. 5:39; Acts 3:18, 24." Quenstedt I, IV, i, *thesis* iv. I have called the matter of the Scripture its meaning, to preserve the dogmatists' intention.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Gerhard, II, I, i, 9.

## II

This concept of the Scriptures is important to remember when we study what the dogmatists teach about the attributes of Scripture and the hermeneutical axiom "Scripture interprets itself." What are properly called perspicuous according to Quenstedt are the signs (*sermones, verba*), *not the meaning of the signs*.

We must make a distinction between the clarity of the subjects which are revealed and the clarity of the words (*verborum*) by which the revealed subjects are signified. We refer not to the former but to the latter, for we acknowledge that many mysteries are contained in the Scriptures . . . but we deny that they are taught in Scripture with obscure terms and with ambiguous words.<sup>16</sup>

Hollaz also asserts, "The Scriptures are called clear not by reason of the subject matter but of the words, for even unclear subjects can be expressed by clear and perspicuous words."<sup>17</sup>

These statements imply that the meaning of the written Scriptures is not to be regarded as intelligible to any ordinary man, but that the syntactical arrangement and verbal equivalents of the Biblical signs can indeed be understood and handled by anyone with enough capacity to handle a grammar and a dictionary. To see that this is the case, let us take note of more elaborate dogmatic comment on the subject.

Gerhard distinguishes between the external and internal clarity of the Scriptures. The term "external clarity" is used by Gerhard in the same sense and for the same purpose that Quenstedt and Hollaz have in mind when they refer to the clarity

<sup>16</sup> Quenstedt, I, IV, ii, *quaest.* xii, *ekthesis* i.

<sup>17</sup> Hollaz, 149.

of vocables and discourse. That is, the Scriptures are said to be externally clear because anyone with a command of Biblical languages can identify the subjects and predicates, the parts of speech, and in short, make *grammatical* sense out of the original languages. But Gerhard insists this is quite insufficient for salvation.<sup>18</sup> He says that "the external clarity of the word does not exclude the necessity of an interior illumination and clarity that must be sought and gained from the Holy Spirit."<sup>19</sup> Just as there is an internal form of the Scriptures, their meaning, there is also an internal clarity which we must possess before that meaning, God's own thought, is apprehended.

The most important consequence of this position is that the true meaning of God's Word is impossible for the natural man to apprehend. Gerhard writes, "This illumination of the Holy Spirit is necessary for properly understanding and interpreting the whole Scripture *and any part of it whatsoever*."<sup>20</sup> Quoting Luther, he repeats several times, "nullus homo unum jota ex naturalibus ingenii sui viribus . . . videt."<sup>21</sup> In summing up his discussion later on Gerhard says

Without the light of the Holy Spirit, our mind is blind in understanding and interpreting the Scriptures; in addition to this blindness which is native to all of us, some are blinded by a unique malice . . .

which is peculiar to those who fervently resist the work of the Spirit.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Gerhard, II, I, xx, 424.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 413. Cf. also n. 7 *supra*.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., I, II, iv, 51. Also I, I, v, 72. My emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., I, I, v, 72. Also, I, II, iv, 69 and 71.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., I, II, iv, 71.

The explanation for the spiritual blindness of natural man Gerhard finds in the Thomistic epistemology which he accepts without criticism.

All knowledge involves the thing to be understood and the intellect that does the understanding, because the act of understanding is the act of receiving into the intellect the species (the object of thought) which has been abstracted from the object to be understood, upon which there follows the action of the agent intellect. . . . Therefore adequation is required between the knowing intellect and the thing to be known. . . . Thus, because the divine mysteries of the faith have been set forth in Scriptures that have proceeded from the immediate revelation of God, they exceed the sphere, so to speak, of our intellect which has been wretchedly corrupted by sin. . . . Hence, in addition to the native powers of our intellect and its primitive resources, so to speak, the irradiation of divine light is required.<sup>23</sup>

A little later he writes, "Apart from this illumination the articles of faith remain obscure and are a closed and sealed book."<sup>24</sup>

In this passage Gerhard reveals his epistemological skepticism. Man's natural intellectual powers are completely unable to derive the divine meaning from the Biblical signs without the aid of God's Spirit. What, then, is the value of the interpreter's mechanical and linguistic skills? Gerhard answers that those skills help only to remove the external obscurities of language and syntax. The obscurity arising from the signs is dispelled.

. . . by the grammatical analysis of the sentences, by the rhetorical exposition of the tropes and figures, by the logical con-

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., I, II, iv, 47, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., I, II, iv, 66.

sideration of the order and circumstances and finally by an acquaintance with physical science.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, the sufficient condition for understanding the *divine meaning*, as opposed to the syntax and verbal equivalents, includes the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

The value, indeed, the very meaning of the hermeneutical principle "Scripture interprets itself" is now easily seen. The principle is simply an elliptical expression of the fact that the Holy Spirit reveals God's thought in Scripture. There is no suggestion implied by that principle to the effect that one passage of a particular Biblical book will automatically throw the light of meaning on another passage which is in question. Scripture, a term which has as its proper meaning the very thought of God from eternity, interprets itself precisely in the sense that God's own thought *makes itself understood* in the mind of the man who has been endowed with the grace to receive it. Nowhere, to my knowledge, is this principle regarded by the dogmatists as a mere lexicographical or syntactical guideline, another mechanical aid in the Bible student's toolbox. It is simply another way of saying that the

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., I, II, iv, 71. The passage goes on, "But the greatest assistance in all these cases is afforded by a prudent and diligent collation of Scripture passages, whenever either the same or different *words* and *phrases* are employed to express the same or different things." My emphasis above indicates that Gerhard is clearly speaking about the *signs* which are to be compared.

Word of God is self-revelatory wherever and whenever and to whomever God chooses to make it so. This understanding of the principle is indisputably affirmed by Quenstedt when he writes, "Scripture itself, or rather, *the Holy Spirit speaking in or through it, is the legitimate and independent interpreter of Himself.*"<sup>26</sup>

The distinction between what we have called signs and their meaning led the theologians of Orthodoxy to emphasize the fact that the Biblical signs do not explain themselves and do not depend for their spiritual meaning upon the intentions of men and the use they give to their words. Verbal entities do not produce meaning. God gives meaning to men's words which makes them vehicles of God's own truth. And without His gracious self-revelatory work in the Scripture, the Biblical books would remain uninterpretable or would be falsely interpreted schemata. This distinction thus serves a contemporary purpose of utmost importance for all those who seek to proclaim or understand God's gracious Word of life. And a significant part of that purpose is the reminder of the holy truth hidden in the words

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. (1 Cor. 2:9, 10)

Tacoma, Wash.

<sup>26</sup> Quenstedt, I, IV, ii, *quaest. xiv, thesis.*