

BRIEF  BOOKS

GOD OF WORD

The Word, the Spirit and how
God speaks to us

JOHN WOODHOUSE



Our quiet, unspoken fear is that the broad stereotype is actually too often true: that the life of an evangelical is dry and lifeless, caught up in intellectual study of the text of Scripture and missing out on the joy and vitality that comes from being connected to the power of the Holy Spirit that many other Christians seem so overtly to experience.

But how *does* God reveal himself to us today? Does he speak in ways other than the Bible? What is the connection between his Word and his Spirit? And where do my emotions fit in?

In this Brief Book, John Woodhouse helps us think through these important and confronting concerns.

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God of Word

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INTRODUCTION

Evangelicals are sometimes accused of worshipping God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Bible. Over the years, I've heard this criticism in many forms. For example:

- Evangelicals spend so much time studying Scripture that we don't actually live it out. All we do is talk about it, priding ourselves on our academic and intellectual rigour.
- Evangelicals focus only on the renewal of the mind, ignoring or downplaying anything to do with the heart, and with feelings and emotions. Our kind of Christianity is dry, cerebral and, frankly, boring.
- Evangelicals emphasize Scripture so much that we exclude the Holy Spirit; we don't allow room for his work in the Christian life. We don't know

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what to *do* with the Spirit, so we ignore him and focus on the Bible instead.

- Evangelicals don't allow for new words from God. We are suspicious of anything that's not written down in the Bible, and so we effectively confine God's revelational power to words on a page written down centuries ago.

These kinds of arguments can leave us feeling incomplete as Christians, not to mention confused. Many of us can sense some truth in at least some of these criticisms. We can end up feeling very insecure, asking questions like:

- Do we put too much emphasis on words? Have I become someone who only hears the word but does not actually do it (Jas 1:22)?
- Do we ignore matters of the heart? Am I a joyless Christian?
- Do we ignore the Holy Spirit? Do I limit his work in my life?
- Does God reveal himself in new ways today? Does the 'word of God' equal 'the Bible'? Should I be seeking to know God through ways other than reading Scripture?

INTRODUCTION

These are all very good questions to be asking ourselves. But the insecurity provoked by these criticisms can be very harmful. It can cause faithful Christians—people who genuinely trust in the saving work of Christ—to doubt whether they are Christian at all, simply because they haven't had the same emotions or experiences as others.

So how *does* God reveal himself and how does he work in our lives? I hope this book removes any insecurity you have, and gives you confidence in your knowledge of God.

Emma Thornett
Editor

1. THE GOD OF WORD

You may have heard the complaint that, for some, Christianity has become a religion of the mind only. The problem, it is said, comes from the exclusive emphasis on the word of God. Words are rational, and by themselves words produce rationalists with a truncated view of Christianity, a limited God, a lack of openness to the fullness of God's blessings, and a religion that is discussed more than it is lived.

This objection is not without substance. There is enough truth in the description for it to be deeply disturbing to many of us.

Have we been guilty of putting undue emphasis on words? Let us look at both the Old and New Testaments to gain some perspectives on the question.

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1. God and his word in the Old Testament

There can be no argument that in the Bible the phenomenon of God's *word* is very important. We think of the psalmist, for whom the instruction ('torah') of the Lord is to be desired more than much fine gold, and is sweeter than drippings of honeycomb (Ps 19:10); we hear the voice of the prophet who declares that "the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Is 40:8); and we remember that most profound description of the incarnation in the fourth gospel—"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." (John 1:14). Wherever we turn in the Bible we find this extraordinary phenomenon: the word of God.

Genesis 1

Perhaps we are too familiar with Genesis 1 to notice that the Bible's description of creation is striking because of this very point: God created the world by *speaking*. There were many other ways in which the ancient world thought of the gods bringing the cosmos into being. Some saw it as an emanation from the thought of the deity; others saw it as an outcome of the activity of the deity, often in battle with opponents. But the Bible says that God spoke: