

The Living and Active Word

- ¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
- ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Hebrews 4:12-13

The Word and the Church

GOD'S WORD. WHAT IS IT? WHAT DOES IT DO? These are two terribly important questions that we will try to answer as we focus in on two verses in **Hebrews (4:12-13)**. To ease us into it, I want us consider a couple of different responses to those questions as they are seen in today's visible church. **The first says that it** believes that the

word of God is powerful, very powerful. But not in an orthodox, biblical way. Rather, it takes ideas from cults like New Thought which popularized the idea that sickness and suffering have their origin in bad thinking, and applies “the word” magically to anything you can dream of, especially things like health and wealth. Just speak “the word” (often: use God’s word out of context) and all your dreams will come true. Hence, the health and wealth prosperity gospel.

I think that Hank Hanegraaff is probably right when he says, “Its emphases [is] on faith, the authority of the believer, and the absolute veracity of Scripture [and thus] could appear to be just what today’s church needs. And yet, I am convinced that this movement poses one of the greatest contemporary threats to orthodox Christianity from within. Through it, cultic theology is being increasingly accepted as true Christianity.”¹ Perhaps the biggest reason why this threat is so real is because this movement has made its way into some of the biggest Christian groups to spring up in the past century (Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement), and through the power of television and books

¹ Hank Hanegraaff, “What’s Wrong with the Word of Faith Movement? (Part One),” Christian Research Journal 15:3 (1993), <http://www.equip.org/article/whats-wrong-with-the-word-faith-movement-part-one/>, last accessed 12-14-2015.

and lots and lots of money, are beamed day and night into the living rooms, and are placed before the eyes of millions of unsuspecting people, some who desperately want to buy the information they are selling.

A **second response** to the question “what does the word of God do,” is to essentially say, “not much.” It isn’t that the word of God doesn’t convey information. Of course it does that. But any ordinary word does that. So the word of God isn’t really any different from other words. Consider this quote. “Whenever the Churches get settled down into a *form* of doing things, they soon get to rely upon the outward doing of it, and so retain the form of religion while they lose the substance. And then *it has always been found impossible to arouse them* so as to bring about a reformation of the evils, and produce a revival of religion, by simply pursuing that established form.”

This stems from his theology of conversion which he says is “not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical [i.e. scientific] result of the right use of [human] means.” These “means” are what he called “**new measures.**” Most of these new measures are through **emotional manipulations**, sometimes through

positive reinforcement (such as the use of specific kinds of music at just the right times in the meetings or anxious benches to dramatize the struggle between heaven and hell), and sometimes through very negative guilt-inducing techniques such as singling out individuals going to hell by name in front of a group. “Without new measures,” he says, “it is impossible that the Church should succeed in gaining the attention of the world to religion. The Church cannot maintain her ground without sufficient novelty in measures, to get the public ear.”²

So it is impossible to gain the world’s ear, that is to arouse enough interest in Christianity to bring people to Christ without new measures and it is impossible to reform bad behavior with the wrong means. Where is God’s word in all of this? It isn’t there because it isn’t necessary. The man who said these things was Charles Finney,³ once described as a “splendid pagan—a young man rejoicing in his strength, proudly conscious of his physical and intellectual superiority to all around him.”⁴ Of all the things we could say about Mr.

² Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, excerpts from Lecture 14: “Measures to Promote Revivals” <http://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/measures-to-promote-revivals-1835>

³ You can read a good summary of all I’ve said here in Jay E. Smith, “the Theology Of Charles Finney: A System Of Self-Reformation,” *Trinity Journal* 13:1 (1992): 62-93.

⁴ W. C. Cochran, *Charles Grandison Finney* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1908) 13. Cited in

Finney, perhaps it is his lack of confidence in the word that stands behind it all. Sadly, the seeds he planted 200 years ago have become crops and fields that see no end of ever newer and ever stranger measures. And the word of God, the real word of God that is, has less a place in today's church than at any time previously.

When [there is little to no confidence in the word of God](#) to actually do anything to anyone, then we become the deciding factor, we and our means, and our manipulations, and our excitements, and our measures, and our novelties, and our relevance, and our coolness, and our happiness, and our yelling, and our berating, and our scolding, and our music, and our dry ice, and our professionalism, and our bigness, and our savvy. We bring someone's will to make that good choice for Jesus, whatever that choice even happens to be these days.

With these two options for the word, we are left wondering, what is the word of God and what does it do? If these alternative ideas don't answer the question properly, what does?

Smith (above).

What is the Word of God? The Scripture

The answer is unfolded in two verses of Hebrews 4. These verses come at the end of the first long argument of Hebrews. It seems to come out of the blue. “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb 4:12-13). It is obvious from reading this that Hebrews believes the word of God is powerful. But the first question I want to ask is, “What is the word of God?”

The question might seem rather absurd. Everyone knows that the word of God is the Bible. This is what I heard growing up when this passage was quoted. So am I hinting here that the Bible is not the word of God? Not at all! The Bible is the word of God, and I believe it means that here. How might we know?

Vs. 12 begins with the word “for,” connecting it to earlier things. The Gospel is the word of God and Hebrews has just been talking about the Gospel. “For good news came

to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened” (Heb 4:2). “Since therefore it remains for some to enter [God’s rest], and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter...” (4:6). He obviously has the words of God in the form of a message in mind, and this message is communicated to us today in the Bible.

Since we have already noted that the verse says the word of God is powerful, let’s look for a moment at one aspect of what this message is said to do. Romans says, “The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). But someone looks at the passages quoted in Hebrews about the good news and asks, “But the people in the OT didn’t receive this power. They weren’t able to enter even though the word was preached.” Charles Finney might have asked the same thing.

But listen carefully to what Romans says. The gospel is the power of God for salvation “to everyone who believes.” You see, it is through the gospel that God grants belief. “For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the

ends of the earth.’ And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:47-48). Belief is the gift of God (Php 1:29). Faith is the gift of God (Eph 2:9). And faith comes through the word of God (Rom 10:17). So it is through the word, the message, the law and the gospel that God saves people.

Hence, the word is powerful. “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1Co 1:18). “The word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1Th 2:13). This is the same idea from the OT. “For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess” (Deut 32:47). Ezekiel saw a valley of dry bones (Ezek 37:1) and the Lord asked him if these bones could live (3). “Lord GOD, you know,” he said. “Prophecy over these bones and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD ... Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live’” (4-5).

Someone might here this and ask, “Does this mean the word is *not* powerful for those who are perishing?” No. It

still accomplishes what God intends it to accomplish. “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa 55:10-11). “Behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them” (Jer 5:14). “Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets...” (Jer 23:29-30).

These are very negative words and many people have a difficult time believing that God hardens people through his word. Yet he does. He also uses his word to punish them for their sins by bringing about circumstances in their lives that are in and of themselves horrible things. These circumstances have a double purpose. One might surprise you. It is to bring people to repentance *through the fire*. Those doubting disciples on the road to Emmaus did not believe the reports they heard, until the word came to them. And

they said, using Jeremiah's fire illustration to show its intent not merely to harden but to convict, "**Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?**" (Luke 24:32). God's word is a fire. But if God's word is not accompanied by the Spirit in an act of effectual calling grace, people will not repent and the word will be the verdict against them on the day of Judgment. This is the other purpose. "**I was good to you. I did all kinds of things to bring you to repentance. I offered you my Son out of love. But you would have none of it. Now, all that is left is fiery torment. May the word be your judge.**"

What is the Word of God? The Son

This **power** of the word **to do whatever God sends it out to do** is a general way of talking about what becomes very specific in the two verses of Hebrews. Notice again that it begins, "**The word of God is living and active...**" Yet, just here, even as we delve into this power of the Word, I want us to note something that Jesus says, for we are not yet done asking what the word of God is. "**It is the Spirit who gives**

life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” (John 6:63). Curiously, Hebrews has talked not only about the word of the gospel in recent verses. It has also talked about the Holy Spirit. “God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Heb 2:4). “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice...’” (Heb 3:7).

The Spirit is a Person, and of course Hebrews has been talking about another Person for four chapters. Jesus is the focus of everything in the book. Jesus said that these are his words and that his words are life, in other words “living and active.” But Jesus also said that he is the life. “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6). The reason I bring this up is because something I never heard growing up was that the Word of God, at least here in Hebrews 4:12 could be the Son of God. We have seen it is the Scripture, but the Son? We are going to see as we go through these verses that much of what is said about the “word of God” is true identically of both the scripture and the Son. This is because the Son’s words cannot be divorced from the Son who is God’s Word. John 1:1, “In

the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Many people who take the position that this the Son of God is not in mind here do so because it seems strange that out of the blue he would suddenly call the Son “the Word.” He has said many things about the Son thus far, but he has not yet called him “the Word.” But does that mean it could not be the Son here? I don’t think so. And neither did virtually any Church Father.

Quoting our verse Athanasius said, “For the Son of God is ‘living and active,’ and works day by day, and brings about the salvation of all” (*Athanasius, On the Incarnation of the Word 31.3*).⁵ Ambrose said, “...it is the Word of God [The Son] alone, which is neither an utterance, nor an “inward concept,” as they call it, but works efficaciously, is living, and has healing power. Wouldst thou know what is the nature of the Word—hear the Scriptures. ‘For the Word of God is living and mighty, yea, working effectually, sharp

⁵ Also, “STATEMENT OF FAITH: WE believe in one Unbegotten¹ God, Father Almighty, maker of all things both visible and invisible, that hath His being from Himself. And in one Only-begotten Word, Wisdom, Son, begotten of the Father without beginning and eternally; word not pronounced nor mental, nor an effluence of the Perfect, nor a dividing of the impassible Essence, nor an issue; but absolutely perfect Son, living and powerful (Heb. 4:12), the true Image of the Father, equal in honour and glory” (*Athanasius, Statement of Faith*) and see *Discourses against the Arians 2.35, 2.72*.

and keener than any the sharpest sword, piercing even to the sundering of soul and spirit, of limbs and marrow” (Ambrose, *on Faith* 4.7.74). We could cite others like Origen,⁶ John Cassian,⁷ John of Damascus,⁸ Basil,⁹ and others.

In his massive commentary on Hebrews John Owen says, “But it is Christ himself who makes the word powerful and sharp: the principal efficiency is in himself, acting in and with it. That then which is here intended, is the spiritual, almighty, penetrating efficacy of the Lord Christ, in his

⁶ “The mouth of the Son of God is a sharp sword, for ‘The word of God is living, and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart’” (Origen, *Commentary John* 1.36).

⁷ “It was of Him [“God”] alone that the blessed Apostle spoke when he said: “For the word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit and of the joints and marrow; and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart; and there is no creature invisible in His sight, but all things are naked and open to His eyes.” (John Cassian, *Conferences* 7.13).

⁸ “If then the Word of God is quick and energising, and the Lord did all that He willed; if He said, Let there be light and there was light, let there be a firmament and there was a firmament; if the heavens were established by the Word of the Lord and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth; if the heaven and the earth, water and fire and air and the whole glory of these, and, in sooth, this most noble creature, man, were perfected by the Word of the Lord; if God the Word of His own will became man and the pure and undefiled blood of the holy and ever-virginal One made His flesh without the aid of seed, can He not then make the bread His body and the wine and water His blood?” (John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 4.13).

⁹ “By a sword is meant the word which tries and judges our thoughts, which pierces even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of our thoughts. Now every soul in the hour of the Passion was subjected, as it were, to a kind of searching. According to the word of the Lord it is said, “All ye shall be offended because of me.” (Basil, *Letter* 260.9). [This is hard to figure out what he means by the word. Could go either way]

dealing with the souls and consciences of men by his word and Spirit.”¹⁰ Owen knows that many do not like this interpretation yet he goes along for page after page demonstrating why Christ is the Word intended here. One of his lines of thought has to do with vs. 13. I wonder, have you ever noticed this?

After talking about the word it suddenly says, “No creature is hidden from *his* sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of *him* to whom we must give account.” “Him/his” is the *personal* pronoun. The Word is a “him” not an “it” in vs. 13. Many commentators are so uncomfortable with this thought that they think that Hebrews moves from the “it” of the *scripture* to God in vs. 12 to the “him” of the Essence of God or perhaps the Father in vs. 13, because of course “him” couldn’t possibly refer to the Son, because he hasn’t talked about the Son as the Word yet. Never mind that the antecedent noun which does personal things can only refer to “the word.” Thus Owen concludes “the same person ... all along [is] intended.”¹¹ It is God’s Son. He is the Word of God in **Hebrews 4:12**.

¹⁰ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. W. H. Goold, vol. 21, Works of John Owen (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1854), 359.

¹¹ Owen, 363.

Given what we are about to see as we look into the various things said about the word of God, **I don't know why we really need to decide between the two.** Is it the Scripture—God's word? Yes. It is the Son—God's Word? Yes. **Why can't both be intended,** as both are said to have the same kinds of attributes. After all, it is the word of the Word, and both are life. Before moving on, **consider why this matters.** As far as the Scripture being powerful, it helps us have confidence that God's word will not return empty, that we can trust it, that it will accomplish all that it is purposed to do. If you are hearing this right now, then know that it is doing something to you and you are responding in some way to it. Is it softening you or hardening you? Is it going to lead you to repentance and faith and sanctification or to judgment and damnation? You are to trust that God's word is powerful, even this moment. For those with faith, it is the very power of God to their justification, sanctification, and glorification. This very word is a means to help you in your Christian life.

Yet, **the word of God is not just abstract ideas coming together to form sentences.** The Word of God from Genesis to Revelation is also a Person. The Word is an eternal

Person. This Person created all things. This Person is Himself God. This Person is behind the words of the Scripture. This Person sends the Holy Spirit who gives life to the words. This Person is himself alive, for Jesus has been raised from the dead. To have no confidence in the Word is not merely to have no confidence in the Scripture, it is to have no confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ. We have a crisis in the American church precisely because it has lost confidence in both the words and the Word of God. But even now God is sending the word out and if we will repent of our lack of faith, God will still bless us through the word-Word, because as it has been saying, it is still “today.” Let’s move now us to what it says the word of God does.

What Does the Word of God Do?

“Living and Active”

Again, we have seen that it says that the word of God is alive. It is “**living and active.**” We have seen that Jesus’ words are said to be alive and that Jesus is himself said to be life. What is said of one is said equally of the other. They are sacramentally linked together as one. Calvin says this speaks

about the efficacy of the word, meaning that it is itself powerful. But he probes as a pastor, “Whenever the Lord addresses us by his word, he deals seriously with us, in order that he may touch all our inmost thoughts and feelings; and so there is no part of our soul which ought not to be roused.”¹²

“*Sharper than a Two-Edged Sword*”

This takes us to the next phrase which begins to flesh out what Hebrews means that it is living and active. It gives this strange metaphor of a sharp two-edged sword (*machaira*). Sometimes *machaira* means a sword as in the weapon that kills (Rev 13:10). In this sense, it is curious that Jesus is said to have a sword and that the sword is his “mouth” (Rev 19:15). “From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron.” Also, “In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword [note the double edges], and his face was like the sun shining in full strength” (Rev 1:16). It is with this sword that he smites the nations.

¹² John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 100.

“And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh” (Rev 19:21). This is the figurative way of talking about eternal judgment which was foreshadowed in the OT when the Angel of the LORD came with his own sword to smite the nations physically (Josh 5:13).

Curiously, in Isa 34:6 LXX, this “sword” of God becomes the sword of sacrifice, but it is still cutting up the nations. “The LORD has a sword; it is sated with blood; it is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah, a great slaughter in the land of Edom.” It is a “day of vengeance” (8) (cf. Isa 63:1ff;¹³ Rev 19:15). This idea of sacrifice is also important, because *machaira* can also mean a knife, specifically a knife used for two things: circumcision (Josh 5:2) and sacrifice (Gen 22:6 LXX).

Put another way, swords belong to kings and the knives belong to priests. Both are there in the message and in the Person of Jesus. We’ve seen the sword of Christ the King.

¹³ Bozrah is cited in both Isa 34:6 and 63:1ff. Isaiah 63 makes it clear that the Angel of the LORD is in mind. It is his sword.

Now consider how the topic in **Heb 4:14** naturally moves from the word to the Son as priest. “**Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.**” This verse actually helps conclude the long section that began with confessing our faith back in **3:1**. Did the “sword/knife” idea help him move back into the priesthood thought?

The sword and knife ideas bring together something I said earlier. The word of God is sent even as a fire for both **judgment and salvation**. And in Christ Jesus the sacrifice of judgment and mercy meet, so that anyone who will trust that judgment was met in Christ will not suffer judgment in their own bodies on Judgment Day. So the question becomes, what kind of sacrifice will you be? Will you be slaughtered in the valley of slaughter with those who trample the Son of God underfoot? Or will your life be a living sacrifice offered up to God through faith in Christ’s sacrifice?

As for the “two-edges” (as Rev 1:16 above) a curious idea is found in the early church. Some of the Fathers said that the “double edge” referred to the two parts of God’s word. Tertullian said, “**See we, then, whether that which**

has another action be not another sword,—that is, the Divine word of God, doubly sharpened with the two Testaments of the ancient law and the new law; sharpened by the equity of its own wisdom; rendering to each one according to his own action” (Tertullian, *Answer to the Jews* 9). Augustine, “And our Lord says, ‘I am not come to send peace on earth, but a sword.’⁷ And Scripture says that the word of God is a doubly sharp sword, on account of the two edges, the two Testaments”¹⁴ (Augustine, *City of God* 20.21.2). It always fascinates me to read the Fathers when they spiritualize like this, because it is so different from what we do today. They did it because they were preachers and their point is to help you focus on the whole word of God, not just a portion of it as being the powerful word of God. This is no NT-only Christianity. All of God’s word (and when Hebrews was written, “God’s Word” WAS the Old Testament!) is sharp, all of it is for the Church, all of it is living and active, all of it is sharp. That’s why I constantly press upon you both Testaments from every text of

⁷ Matt. 10:34.

¹⁴ Augustine of Hippo, “The City of God,” in *St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 441.

Scripture.

“Piercing Soul and Spirit” and “Discerning the Heart”

This sharp sword or knife is then said to “**pierce**” and “**discern**.” Knives and swords piercing makes sense. What does it pierce? It piercing **the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow**. This is a rather strange thing to say. Should we take it literally, as if the human being is composed of a separate soul and spirit, as if they are two different components of a person? Some use it as a proof-text for this. And what about piercing joints and marrow? From a strictly medical point of view, this doesn’t make much sense, since marrow is inside of bones and isn’t attached to joints. What is going on here?

The next part helps us understand that this is figurative language. Swords discerning does not make a lot of sense, but Jesus discerning something makes perfect sense. The word of God is alive and not only does he pierce, he cuts. This is personal language of a Personal God. When you set piercing and discerning as parallels it is easy to see that the language is figurative. Wayne Grudem has some helpful thoughts on this:

He is using a number of terms (soul, spirit, joints, marrow, thoughts and intentions of the heart) that speak of **the deep inward parts of our being** that are not hidden from the penetrating power of the Word of God. If we wish to call these our “soul,” then Scripture pierces into the midst of it and divides it and discovers its inmost intentions. If we wish to call this inmost nonphysical side of our being our “spirit,” then Scripture penetrates into the midst of it and divides it and knows its deepest intentions and thoughts. Or if we wish to think metaphorically of our inmost being as hidden in our joints and in the marrow, then we can think of Scripture being like a sword that divides our joints or that pierces deeply into our bones and even divides the marrow in the midst of the bones. In all of these cases the Word of God is so powerful that it will search out and expose all disobedience and lack of submission to God. In any case, soul and spirit are not thought of as separate parts; they are simply additional terms for our inmost being.¹⁵

¹⁵ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 479.

What kind of power does the word have? It has the same power that God has, because God word and God's Word are one. Perhaps having Jeremiah in mind throughout this passage it is easy to think of something like this, "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind" (Jer 17:10). Do you see how the word of God in Hebrews has the very power of God? God knows even your thoughts (Ps 94:11; 139:23). He "searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought" (1Chr 28:9). He "sees the heart and the mind" (Jer 20:12). "The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

Again, we may usually think of Hebrews 4:12 here as talking about the Scripture. But these things are also said of the Son. At his birth we read, "And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.'" This is virtually what Hebrews says about the word.¹⁶ John's

¹⁶ The conceptual overlap appears in five English words: sword, pierce, soul, thoughts, hearts. Given that Luke may be the author of Hebrews, it is curious that this comes in Luke's Gospel. However, the Greek words are not identical.

Gospel confirms this kind of thing when it says things like, “He knew all people ...he himself knew what was in man” (John 2:24-25). Then there is Jesus in Revelation, “I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works” (Rev 2:23). Thus Calvin says, “It is Christ’s office to uncover and bring to light the thoughts from the recesses of the heart, this he does for the most part by the Gospel.” I wonder, are you listening?

Why the Word is Here

“No Creature is Hidden from His Sight”

I pray you are because all of this is incredible. What kind of God is this to know such things? But more than incredible, it is—apart from faith in Christ Jesus—a *terrifying thing*. If God searches your heart, tests your mind, and knows your thoughts, if he is able to discern not only your

Luke 2:35		Hebrews 4:12	
sword	<i>rhompbaia</i>	sword	<i>machaira</i>
pierce	<i>dierchomai</i>	piercing	<i>diikneomai</i>
soul	<i>psuche</i>	soul	<i>psuche</i>
thoughts	<i>dialogismos</i>	thoughts	<i>entbumesis</i>
heart	<i>kardia</i>	heart	<i>kardia</i>
reveal	<i>apokalupto</i>	judge	<i>kritikos</i>

actions but your very intentions, then this means that you cannot run from God. You cannot hide from him. You cannot fool him. He sees absolutely everything about you. Wherever you go he is there. He knows every thought you have had, every motive from which you done an act, every sin you have committed not only outwardly but in the inner man.

What's more, **you know this is true**. This is why when you commit sins that you know no one knows about, your conscience still condemns you. Why would that even be? If no one knows what you have thought or done, why should there be any guilt whatsoever? If sin is only wrong when you get caught, if all we are held accountable to is some arbitrary law created by a majority opinion in a population of people, this conscience thing makes absolutely no sense. It is there because it is testifying to you that God knows your heart (**Rom 2:14-15**). Why run away from a God you know will find you? Why hide from a God you know can see you?

Now, this isn't just my conclusion. This is the very direction Hebrews is taking you. It talks about the word in this way in order to make you understand that “**no creature is hidden from his sight**” (**Heb 4:13**). Whose sight? The sight

of “the word of God.” It is the sight of the Word and the Spirit who do what they do on behalf of the Father. This is God in Three Persons blessed Trinity.

“We Must Give an Account”

Let’s conclude by thinking about what it would mean for the word of God to search our hearts? The verse in Jeremiah we read above says, “I the LORD search the heart and test the mind,” and the LORD here has to include Father and Son and Spirit. But to the question, the verse continues, “... to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds” (Jer 17:10). This is Judgment. The word judges. Again, seeing the word as impersonal like the Scripture or the words of God is necessary. Jesus himself said, “The word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day” (John 12:48).

But Hebrews 4:13 is fascinating here in another way. Continuing with the personal imagery of the word, “... all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him.” The word has “eyes.” The word is again “him.” How do I know that this “him” refers to the Word and not more generally to the essence of God? There are a few ways.

As with the previous personal pronoun in this verse, “word” is still the nearest antecedent subject (i.e. “word” is the closest subject that has come before this). But more than this, did you know that *logos* is in both of these verses? Some have commented on the nature of these two verses noting that they seem to almost read like an early church hymn.¹⁷ They have imagery, metaphors, colorful language, and repetition. Besides this, the verses begin and end with the *logos*. But you wouldn’t know it from the English.

The first *logos* is of course the “word” of God in vs. 12. The second is the word “account” in vs. 13 in the ESV. On 4:13, “... exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account (*logos*)” This is a difficult phrase (*pros hon hēmin ho logos*) to translate. Owen says, “Λόγος is ‘an account;’ there is no other word used in the New Testament to express it ... and ... is rightly rendered, ‘to whom we must give an account.’”¹⁸ Yet, in using *logos* twice, it seems to me that he

¹⁷ For example, “They are poetic in style, using a high proportion of unusual words, figurative language, and a frequent though not monotonous number of terms accented vigorously on the last syllable. Other poetic features include the cumulation of words and phrases with overlapping meaning, and some obscurity in construction.” Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1993), 260.

¹⁸ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. W. H. Goold, vol. 21, Works of John Owen (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1854), 364–365. Of the pronoun Owen writes,

is using a deliberate word play. Thus Owen continues, “For evidencing [to] them the efficacy and omniscience of the Word of God, trying all things, and discerning all things, he minds them of their near concernment in these matters, in that he and they must all give up their final accounts [to] and before him who is so intimately acquainted with what they are, and with whatsoever they shall do in this world.”

To bring out this wordplay in English so that we could more easily see that Christ is in view in doing in doing some kind of judging here we could say something like, “... all are naked and susceptible to scrutiny by the eyes of the one whose word is meant for us” (MIT) or perhaps “... to him who is for us the word”¹⁹ Clearly, the word/Word of God judging just like God is doing in **Jeremiah 17:10**. Or, perhaps more curiously, what Jesus does throughout the NT:

“Αὐτοῦ must refer to ὁ Λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ, “the Word of God,” in the beginning of verse 12; and cannot respect πρὸς ὃν, in the end of this verse. For the interposition of the adversative particle δέ, “but,” and the introduction of the relative αὐτοῦ again, do necessarily refer this αὐτοῦ to ὁ Λόγος, and proves the same person to be all along intended.”

¹⁹ This suggestion was given to me by pastor Matt Foreman.

- “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22)
- “He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed” (Acts 17:31)
- “That day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (Rom 2:16)
- “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2Co 5:10)

Remember how it says that No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him? In Zech 4:10 and Rev 5:6 the “eyes of the LORD of Hosts” appear to be the eyes of the Son and those eyes are the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit again comes into view. Hebrews loves alluding to the Spirit. He is the very Breath of the Word. Some of the Fathers took the idea that Christ is the Word and the Sword is the Spirit (Eph 6:17) and saw both persons here in those ways too (see John Cassian).

Beloved, these two famous verses are packed full of important theology for your salvation and for the well being of the church. They teach us that we must have confidence

in the power of the word of God. Without such confidence, the church and we ourselves will slip into using our own means to achieve the ends that only the word can produce. The church is in desperate need of repenting of this sin and trusting in the power of God's word once more. But if she will, she can know that the word is still powerful to do everything God desires it to accomplish. It has not grown weak. Rather, we have grown weak in our faith in it. The greatest cure for the ills of that plague the church is to trust once more in God's powerful word.

That means starting with actually learning, reading, teaching, and preaching the word of God again, for how else can we know about God unless the Scriptures are understood. It is ironic and sad how little we know about the Bible given that we have more access to it than any other generation in history. But going to the Bible as an end to itself—like the Pharisees did when Jesus said that they search the Scriptures thinking that in them you have eternal life. But the Scriptures are given to us to point us to him. They bear witness about him ([John 5:39](#)).

This is why we must see that the word in our passage refers [to the Scripture and to Christ](#), to the word and the

Word. And Jesus himself points us to the Father and has given us the Spirit of Truth who searches the minds and hearts and leads us to God. It is Jesus' job to judge. Judgment has been given to the Son. He sees and knows all men. He knows you, and you must give an account to the Word who will judge you. And so I would call you to trust anew or for the first time in the Son of God this day, to repent of your sins, and to rely solely upon Christ alone for your salvation. I leave you with the words of Isaiah who long ago prophesied,

And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a blossom shall come up from *his* root: and the Spirit of God shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and godliness shall fill him; the spirit of the fear of God. He shall not judge according to appearance, nor reprove according to report: but he shall judge the cause of the lowly, and shall reprove the lowly of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the word of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he destroy the ungodly one.

(Isa 11:1-4 LXA)

“Now to whom did he point but to the people of Christ? God blesses him into whose heart the Word of God enters, *even to the dividing asunder of the soul, and of the joints and marrow.*”²⁰ (Ambrose, *Letters* 50.12).

²⁰ Ambrose of Milan, *The Letters of S. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan*, trans. H. Walford, A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church (London; Oxford; Cambridge: Oxford; James Parker and Co.; Rivingtons, 1881), 322.