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The Authority of the Bible from the Perspective of Isaiah 55

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Introduction

The text we usually cite when dealing with the issue of the inspiration and authority of the Bible is 2 Timothy 3:16. However, the matter of Scriptural authority may be placed in a broader perspective, since every biblical corpus adds a significant contribution to this subject.

The debate revolves around the question whether one is in full or partial favor of the working hypotheses of the Neo-Orthodox approaches which postulate that the Bible is not the Word of God, but only contains or testifies to the Word of God. Even though it may be legitimate to say that the Bible testifies to the Word of God, that is, to Jesus, or that the Bible contains some direct utterances of God, such as the Ten Commandments and a considerable number of other declarations, all the biblical data on the issue needs to be taken into account.

Jesus, Himself, the prophets before Him, and the apostles after Him, regarded the Bible as the Word of God. (Cf. the unequivocal statement of the apostle Paul concerning the Jewish canon in Rom 3:1, 2). Jesus recognized the entire Jewish canon as authoritative. Each of

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the three divisions (Law, Prophets, and Writings) are mentioned (Luke 24:44). One of the most remarkable features in favor of the view that the whole Bible is to be considered the Word of God—in addition to the direct and explicit utterances of God—is the way “OT statements not made by God in their contexts, are quoted as utterances of God (Matt 19:4f; Heb 3:7; Acts 13:34 citing Gen 2:24; Ps 95:7, Is 55:3 respectively).”¹

For this article I have chosen to consider our topic from the perspective of the book of Isaiah. It will help to focus on what is at stake in the issue over the authority of the Bible, and how a clear understanding of the matter is of vital importance for the end-time people of God and for their mission to the world. We will examine Isaiah 55, and in particular vss. 6-13. This passage is considered “prophecy’s most comprehensive statement about the word of Yahweh and its effects. . . ; the dimensions are extended to the furthest limits of thoughts and even to the very foundations of Theology.”² R. M. Whybray calls this passage, along with Isaiah 40:8, “the most profound statement about God’s word to be found in the Old Testament.”³

Literary Analysis

The overall literary structure of the chapter may be arranged as follows:

- A1 The first picture: Individual renewal, needs met (1)
- B1 Hearing the Word of the Lord (2-36)
 - C1 The certainty of the promises (3c-5)
 - D The content of the word: a call to repent (6-7)
 - C2 The seriousness of the call (8-9)
- B2 The efficaciousness of the word of the Lord (10-11)
- A2 The second picture: world renewal, the curse lifted (12-13)⁴

The first part of the chapter (vss. 1-5) deals with an invitation to

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a banquet, a feast in a covenant setting.⁵ Different interpretations have been proposed concerning the nature of the invitation. in vs. 1.⁶ Some think it alludes to the cry of the water seller in the market place, or is a parallel to Wisdom's invitation in Proverbs, chapter 9. However, verse 2 specifies that the invitation is indeed to come to God, to listen; our lives depend on this very act of listening. This statement is followed by a messianic prophecy (vs. 3, cf. Acts 13:34).

In the last part of the chapter (vss. 6-13) the prophet uses figures which may be organized as follows:

	Heavens	God	Thoughts	Ways
The Means—	Rain and Snow		Word	
	Earth	Humankind	Thoughts	Ways
The Results—	It is watered		Liberation	
	It bears		Joys	
	It sprouts		Peace	
It furnishes	seed to the sower bread to the eater Universal Restoration Covenant Blessings Jubilation/Worship/Testimony			

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General Observations on Verses 6-13

A few observations are in order. First, there is an urgent invitation to “seek,” “call,” “forsake,” and “return.” Urgency is indicated by the temporal clauses in vs. 6, “while He may be found,” “while He is near” (NASB). Then the prophet turns to compare the surpassing height of the heavens to the earth, the transcendence of God’s thoughts and ways to our thoughts and ways (vss. 8-9).⁷ Between the above two emphases is stated the compassion which God is willing to manifest to the repentant, lost and confused sinner (the one who formerly spent money for what was not bread, and wages for what did not satisfy (vs. 2).

The phrases used to describe the sinner express both the distance separating him/her from God (seek, call, return) and the natural holding on to wickedness (forsake). It is significant that wickedness is noticeable in the ways of its casualties, and unrighteousness in the thoughts of the erring and confused human beings (vss. 6-7). From the perspective of this text, anything that is not precisely God’s thought and God’s way is alienating and ultimately destructive.

The call to conversion (vs. 7) is necessary, since the thoughts and ways which are not from above are bound to result in drought, famine and ultimately death. The Hebrew word (šûb) used to express the return to God points to a genuine conversion experience. This conversion implies not only a change of behavior, but also a change of mentality. Both the ways and the thoughts of humankind are to be deliberately abandoned, not for a limited time, but permanently. However, this is not for the sake of experiencing a mystical experience of emptiness, but rather so as to be shaped by the word of God.

Although the term “holiness,” an important word in Isaiah’s theology, is not explicitly mentioned in chapter 55, in reality it is present on a thematic level. The abandonment of the penitent’s thoughts and ways in exchange for God’s thoughts and ways is an experience of separation from our sinfulness for God’s holiness. The systematic theological category of “sanctification” can be used to

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label such an experience; the conversion to God, the reception of His forgiving grace, the clinging to Him for the transformation of our thoughts and ways, are all elements of sanctification.

After issuing the invitation, the prophet comments on the divine attitude which repentant sinners will meet when they come to God, that is, His compassion (vs. 7). The Hebrew word for “compassion” describes a powerful emotion of deep concern for the welfare of another. Commenting on this work, Andrew Purves notices that, “Unlike our common connection with the heart, the Hebrews connected emotions with the lower viscera, the organs located in the abdominal cavity.”⁸ He also describes this experience as meaning figuratively to have the bowels turned over, what he calls a “gut-wrenching experience.”⁹

Within the limits of anthropomorphic language, this description tells us about God’s response to the human predicament. Indeed, God is amazing. He promises to pardon abundantly. This disposition to give, to give beyond the limits of any merit, is at the foundation of the covenant mentioned in the first section of chapter 55.

The prophet now moves to the agricultural realm to employ a remarkable simile to show that our conversion to God is, in fact, an absolute necessity—a life and death issue. Without rain and snow there is drought; the land, parched and dry, becomes a desert; famine becomes the lot of the inhabitants. At this point it is useful to recall the first invitation in verses 1-2 in order to show the coherence of the whole unit in terms of themes, metaphors and configuration (“Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat,” etc., NASB). In the sequence to the second invitation (vss. 6-7) the prophet describes the results of the outpouring of the rain and snow (vs. 10). The earth is watered, it bears, it sprouts, it furnishes seed to the sower and bread to the eater. The whole process ends at the table (so to speak). This metaphor was already employed in verse 2.

Is the prophet simply giving a lecture on agriculture? If this was

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the case, it would indeed be strangely superficial. On the contrary the prophet moves from the known realm of nature to explain the necessity for humankind to receive the word of God so as to change the desert-like life of the sinner. To say it differently: the covenant curse of a dry and unproductive life is changed into a blessing subsequent to the sending and reception of the word of God.

Defining the “Word of God”

Scholarly Views. In the literature commenting on Isaiah 55 the expression “word of God” is variously understood. For example,

1. As a prediction or a promise of return from exile.
2. As an announcement of God’s plan and the appointment of Darius.
3. As the powerful overriding word of God which has its decisive say in history.
4. As whatever proceeds from the mouth of God, not merely some specific prophecy or utterance which is revealed.
5. As God’s authoritative speech, the power by which He brings all things to pass according to His will, His personal presence with His creatures.

Biblical View. In the context of Isaiah several observations should be made for a biblical understanding of the expression “word of God.” These observations will clarify the issues regarding the authority of the Bible and will show the relevance of such issues for our practical life as end-time people of God.

1. Because of the synonymic parallelism between the “word of the Lord” and the “instruction of God” (1:10), the “law” (2:3), the “law of the Lord” (5:24), we may safely say that the “word of the Lord” is intended to provide guidance. This is its didactic aspect. We also find this aspect in Isaiah 30:20-21. “Although the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression, He, your teacher will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher. And

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your ears will hear a word behind you, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right or to the left." (NASB).

2. In the same context of Isaiah the prophet is commissioned to write the word of God on a tablet and scroll so that it might serve as a witness forever (Isa 30:8).

3. In Isaiah 8:20 the word, understood as "the law" and "the testimony," is presented as the only reliable source of truth. Instead of consulting mediums, soothsayers and the like, God's people are to rely on His word. The word of God is the foundation of life for His followers.

4. The predictive aspect of the word of God occurs several times in the book (16:13; 24:3; 39:8, etc.)

5. The juridical aspect of the word of God occurs in the setting of the covenant lawsuit as an indictment against covenant breakers (28:14; 32:9; 37:21, 22). This emphasis is relevant not only for God's people, but also for the whole of humankind. Human beings are to be judged by the word of God, not the other way around.

6. The word of God is eternal. "The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever" (40:8, NASB).

7. The word of the Lord is efficacious. It accomplishes the Divine intent. "It [will] not return to Me empty" (Isa 55:11) especially, its creation of a genuine worshiping community. The Lord says: "I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from my mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance" (Isa 45:23, NASB).

8. From the same perspective of worship, the Sabbath is portrayed as a day when we are invited to desist from our ways, to refrain from seeking our own pleasure, and from speaking our own word (Isa 58:13). More positively, we are invited to cling to God's word which reveals God's thoughts and ways (Isa 55:8-9). Thus, the Sabbath is a sign of the giving up of our own thoughts and ways.

9. The word of God, because of its very nature produces in the believer a proper respect or "fear of the Lord." In Isaiah 66:2, 5, the

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characteristics of God's people are described: They are humble and contrite in spirit. These terms express a genuine attitude of repentance. The attitude is noted twice in the context of the chapter: "These tremble at the word of God" (vss 2, 5).

10. Finally, God's people, like Isaiah himself, the proleptic representative of God's remnant, hear the voice of God and respond positively to the call to "go." This is the missionary aspect of the word of God (Isa 6:7-8).

Along the same line of thinking, especially when we try to comfort hurting people, discouraged by life's wounds, we will benefit—and God's plan will benefit, if we remember the following: "The Lord has given Me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple" (Isa 50:4, NASB). Although they may provide relief, if properly practiced, no psychotherapy, psychology, psychoanalysis, nor any section of the human sciences, will ultimately provide genuine and lasting solutions to human predicaments of any kind. Anything not based on the foundation of God's word will at best provide only ephemeral relief.

The Effective "Word of God"

Within the immediate context of Isaiah 55 the "word of God" is described in regard to its origin, its effectiveness, and its results. It is divine in origin for it proceeds out of the mouth of God (vs 11); is efficient as an agent of transformation (vs 11); and its results express the will of God in deliverance/salvation with their accompanying signs of liberation, joy and peace. Let us examine these aspects briefly.

Origin. God's word issues from His mouth, that is, from Himself, mainly for the purpose of accomplishing life-saving transformations. This is what God desires. This aspect of the word is indeed the core and the purpose of the whole demonstration. It is the main focus of the text.

Another insight which can be perceived from the descent of

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God's word is that He intends everything on the human level to be shaped by it and to find its root and justification from it (vss 10-11). The recent multiplication of theologies have here an urgent challenge to reconsider their "raison d'être."

Daniel J. Adams has formulated the issue as follows: "The question that confronts us, therefore, is what are the sources of theology? How does one define the center of theology? What are the parameters of theology beyond which one ceases to do theology but rather philosophy, sociology, psychology or something else."¹⁰ When culture, or any human structure and the realities they generate, is made to function as the norm, then the human predicament is caught in a circle. An intervention from above is indeed needed, not only for the transformation of our ways but also for the generating and shaping of our thoughts.

Effectiveness and Results. The reason why God sends His word through the prophets is ultimately to change our thirst, hunger, famine and death into an abundant life (vss 11-12; cf. John 10:10). We are assured that the word of God will not come back to Him empty, unsuccessful. It will accomplish the salvation of those who receive that word in an attitude of humility and repentance. The predicted result is that they will turn to God and espouse His thoughts and ways.

God's program is not like the so-called "liberation theology" with its merit of reminding the world of the relevance of doing something to address and eventually to reverse the plight of the poor, but whose primary humanistic agenda colored by Marxism has negated the divine solution.

J. Ronald Blue is correct when he assesses that: "Liberation theology begins with man and ends with man. The strong core of humanism is undeniable. Herein lies a grave danger in the proposed solution to injustice; liberation theology has overlooked the creative force of the transcendent Deity. Without God and His transforming power, it is doubtful that any lasting good can be realized in society.

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The alienation between human beings reflects their alienation from God. Humanistic attempts at reform fall short of the mark. Man needs more than a change of clothes; he needs a change of heart.”¹¹

The liberation implied in our passage is accompanied with joy, the result of God’s presence and reconciliation (vs 12). Moreover, instead of wandering helpless and hopeless, without guide or shepherd, following a hungry and thirsty horde, God promises that the repentant will be led in peace for such is the heritage of His flock.

Even nature, which awaits the revelation of the repentant ones vindicated by God (cf. Rom 8:19-23), bursts into an unprecedented celebration of gratitude, for it also is liberated from the thorn and the thistle (vs. 13). This celebration is occasioned by the reversal of the covenant curses. This will be a memorial to the Lord adds the text, an everlasting sign which will not be cut off.

“Conquerors in the ancient world were accustomed to set up memorials that would preserve their names and tell of their conquests. . . The transformed earth would be a memorial of God’s victory. . . forever a sign of the power of the living God. . . a transformed earth, a transformed community, a transformed humanity. . .”¹²

A transformed people in a transformed world, will be an everlasting sign. They will reveal who and what the Lord is to them and to creation. It is the Lord’s name, His reputation, which is revealed through His redeemed people.

An Excursus

Eschatology. The text of Isaiah 55 displays some eschatological aspects. For example, a time is coming when God will not be found (“Seek the Lord while He may be found,” Isa 55:6, NASB). This echoes what God Himself declares in the book of Amos (Amos 8:11-12).

Another eschatological note in the passage is linked to the promised Messiah. God says, “I will make an everlasting covenant with you according to the faithful mercies shown to David” (Isa 55:3).

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An inspired interpretation sees in this promise a messianic prophecy (Acts 13:34).

Jesus and the Word of God. The comparison between the descent of the word of God and the NT affirmations about the person and ministry of Jesus show striking similarities. These further our understanding concerning the word of God. All the claims about the origin, the effectiveness, and the results subsequent to the descent of the word apply to Jesus.

The Gospel of John, which focuses on the divine Word, also speaks about the descent of the Word to become flesh (John 1:1-3, 14). In the same Gospel the descent of the Word provides an opportunity for liberation, joy, and peace. Jesus said: “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. . . If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:31, 36, NASB).

Jesus also said, “These things I have spoken to you that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full,” (John 15:11, NASB). As the true shepherd, Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful” (John 14:27, NASB).

Along with the same pastoral configuration (which evokes guidance, security and peace) the eschatological vision of the great multitude, drawn from every nation, tribe, and people, describes the antitypical Feast of Tabernacles. Then the redeemed are assured that they will not hunger nor thirst anymore, for “the Lamb in the center of the throne shall be their shepherd and shall guide them to springs of the water of life.” (Rev 7:17).

Thus, as the Bible is the revealed written word of God, Jesus is the word of God who became flesh for the salvation of humankind.

Summary

Through our study we have come to realize that the connection between Heaven and humankind is made through the “word of God”

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which revitalizes our being and quenches our deepest hunger and thirst. Through the agency of the word, God transforms our famine into a banquet. This is the experience of those who come to God, who listen carefully, who incline their ear, who seek God, who call upon Him, who forsake their wicked ways and truly return to the compassionate God. These people adopt and espouse God's thoughts and ways in their lifestyle.

Those who respond to the invitation to receive the word enter the world of "an everlasting sign." This "breed of believers" demonstrate in daily living the presence and action of the Word who came down from Heaven so that humankind might have life and have it abundantly. The Word came down to transform humankind, to turn us to God, to save us from famine, from death, and to introduce us into an everlasting covenant.

The issue of the authority of the Bible is, therefore, of utmost importance. The contribution of Isaiah 55 places the debate into the perspective of a life and death issue. The response to the invitation to receive the word forms either a covenant with God which results in liberation, joy, and peace, when it is positive, or (to use Isaiah's words) a covenant with death when it is a refusal to give heed to God's word in a repentant attitude of heart and mind.

Other Descents. To broaden the perspective of the issue, it may be useful to note that the descent of the word from God is not a unique phenomenon in the setting of the book of Isaiah. The descent from Heaven which results in salvation pertains likewise to the Spirit of God (Isa 32:15-16). Significantly enough, the Spirit's descent also results in a transformation of the land, the city and the life of God's people. The descent of the Spirit is compared to rain, pouring down water from heaven, resulting in the upspringing of justice, righteousness, peace, and security. The role of the Spirit of God, as a transforming agent, as the blessing that reverses the covenant curses and restores the covenant relationship between God and His people, is further expressed in Isaiah 44:3-5.

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Another descent that is prayed for and expected is that of God Himself. This longing is expressed by the prophet. "Oh, that Thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at Thy presence—As fire kindles the brushwood, as fire causes water to boil—To make Thy name known to Thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at Thy presence!" (Isa 64:1-2, NASB). This descent, like the one mentioned in Isaiah 31:4, is to wage war on behalf of His people, to rescue them from the hand of their adversaries.

Finally, in the setting of the book of Isaiah, the attitude of God's people toward His word is enlightening. In fact, the group to which the prophet Isaiah himself belongs is characterized by a positive response toward God's word. This is shown by their dependence and reliance on God's law and testimony (Isa 8:16-22).

Some Conclusions

The condition which raises the issue of the authority of God's word is the condition of humankind—a lost, confused and dying world. Since the intrusion of sin and the subsequent fall, our world has been in need of salvation. Humankind within the context of the great moral controversy between God and Satan needs infallible guidance in order to renew its relationship with God. Nature does not provide such guidance for the knowledge of God. Intuition, reason, and conscience are subject to mistake.

The real question underlying the issue of the authority of the Bible is simply this: What is the extent of the Creator's authority in our lives, and where do we find infallible standards expressing His will for humankind? As created beings we are totally dependent on God for our very existence; His will is made known to us in the Bible.

The authority of the Bible extends to every aspect of our lives. No matter what domain one evokes, the Bible provides not only guidelines but also standards of what is right and what is wrong; what is conformed to God's will and what is not according to His plan;

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what to believe and what not to believe; how to live and how not to live. This is so because the authority of the Bible is linked to the issue of God's sovereignty over our lives. Our true calling is to acknowledge God as our king and ourselves as subjects of His kingdom, living exclusively to glorify His name.

In other words, every aspect of our lives is to show that God, as revealed through His written Word, is the ultimate authority to whom our allegiance is due, whether those aspects be physical, psychological, spiritual, or social. The whole of our lives is to magnify His name.

In the area of our economic life, the tithe the Bible requires of God's people shows He is our Owner. In the management of our time, the Sabbath points to Him as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, the Source and reference of our thoughts and goal of our pilgrimage. The way we deal with our bodies reveals we are the temples of the Holy Spirit. Whether we eat, drink, or do anything else in words or in deeds, the Bible tells us to do it in the name of Jesus, under His authority and approval, to the glory of the Father. Marriage, the domestic life, the education of our children are to be modeled according to God's will and plan. Even the mercantile domain or the juridical sphere are no exception. In these areas of life, too, God's sovereignty applies. For all these important matters, God gives to us His Word as a lamp at our feet, and as a light for our pilgrimage on earth.

Endnotes

1 J. I. Packer, "Inspiration," *New Bible Dictionary* Second Edition (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 517.

2 Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. II (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 93.

3 R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1987), p. 197.

4 J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 452.

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5 John D. Watts, Isaiah 34-66, *World Biblical Commentary* 25 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), p. 246; Richard J. Clifford, "Isaiah 55: Invitation to a Feast," *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth, Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of his Sixtieth Birthday*, eds. Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), p. 27.

6 J. Begrich, *Studien zu Deuteronesaja*, Rpt., 1969, Theologische Bucherei 20 (Munich: Kaiser, 1938), pp. 59-60, postulated that the call in verses 1-3a was an invitation by Wisdom to a banquet, comparable to Proverbs 9 and Sir 24: 19-22. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1890) suggested that the verses allude to the cry of the water seller in the marketplace. See also J. Muilenburg, "The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66," *The Interpreter's Bible*, Ed. G. A. Buttrich et al (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 381-773. For a summary of the various attempts to identify the voice and the genre of the summons, see Walter Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 136-137.

7 The importance of the comparison has been highlighted by the tools of rhetorical analysis. See Kenneth E. Bailey, "Inverted parallelisms" and "Encased parables" in Isaiah and their Significance for OT and NT Translation and Interpretation," *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible*. Eds. L. J. de Regt, J. de Waard and J. P. Fokkelman (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1996), pp. 14-30. The procedure consists of an "encased parable" within an inverted parallelism.

A For my thoughts are not your thoughts Thoughts
B Neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord Ways
C For as the heavens are higher than the earth Parable
B' So are my ways higher than your ways Ways
A' And my thoughts than your thoughts Thoughts

8 Andrew Purves, *The Search for Compassion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 69.

9 Ibid.

10 Daniel J. Adams, "Toward a Theology of the Word of God," *Theology and Life* 9 (1986): 65-90. He wrote: "The seemingly endless varieties of theology appearing on the scene today are, to say the least confusing; indeed, it almost appears at times that theology has lost its center as a discipline. The parameters of theology have been stretched to the limit so that virtually anything said by a theologian about any topic qualifies as theology. Furthermore, one does not even have to be a theologian, for there are those who assert that 'true theology' comes from the peasants and workers in their struggle against oppression."

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- 11 J. Ronald Blue, "Major Flaws in Liberation Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1990): 89-103.
12 J. D. Stuart, *History and Theology in the Second Isaiah* (Epworth, 1965), p. 228.