

HISTORY

Vollenhoven on “Word of God”

by Al Wolters

Ever since Justin Martyr, Christian philosophers have looked to the expression "Word of God" as a key for the biblical understanding of created reality. Especially the Prologue to the Gospel of John has played an important role in the history of reflection in this regard. "Word of God" has been almost universally understood as an ontological structuring principle, and conceived of in essentially Neoplatonic terms ("ideas in the mind of God"). In recent years the subject has been the topic of considerable debate, especially centering on the question whether "Word of God" should be understood in the sense "law for creation".

Vollenhoven has dealt with the question of the Word of God with considerable acuity and subtlety. He discusses the question in his syllabus for systematic philosophy, *Isagoge Philosophiae*, especially in the section on "Religion". This mimeographed syllabus has passed through a number of different editions, not all of which I possess. His comments on the Word of God are most extensive in the earliest copy I have, which is dated January 1931. Although some of the material presented there is deleted from subsequent editions (notably the presently current version, which goes back to 1943), the distinctions made in 1931 seem to be presupposed throughout.¹

To understand Vollenhoven on this point, we must grasp clearly the terminological distinctions he makes, and to put them in the context of his basically Trinitarian framework. God is sovereign in the absolute sense of the word, and his sovereignty is threefold: . he is "sovereign in his creating, in his speaking and in the guidance (leiding) which he gives to all things" (*Isagoge Philosophiae* 1931, p. 10). This distinction in God's sovereign activity is rooted in the distinction within God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (*ibid.* p. 41). As Father, God creates, as Son he speaks, and as Spirit he guides.

The relation of creation (het geschapene) to God is completely determined by the above. "Creation is completely dependent on the Creator, entirely subject to his sovereign law, word-revelation and guidance" (*ibid.* p. 11). In other words, there is a correlation between Father, creating, and law, between Son, speaking, and word-revelation, and between Spirit and guidance. For the following discussion it is important to note that law and word-revelation are carefully distinguished here.

[6] What does Vollenhoven have in mind when he speaks of these Trinitarian correlations? Let me try to organize his various statements about each.

¹ Evidence for the fact that Vollenhoven still holds to these distinctions in the 1943 edition of his syllabus can be found in the following quotes from that syllabus (cited from the mimeographed copy made in 1967):

a) Section 13 (p. 13): II Creation is completely dependent on the Creator, i.e., entirely subject to His sovereign law, wordrevelation and guidance (leiding)."

b) Section 113 (p. 74): II...understood in its full concreteness."

Section 115 (p. 75): II...because he is created, addressed (aangesproken), and directed to the good by God." "Along with (bij) the latter (i.e., God's creative activity), the activity of Logos and Spirit plays a special role (Ps. 33:6)."

It would seem from this that the Trinitarian framework, the distinction between "law" and a "word(-revelation)" and the association of the latter with the activity of the Logos is still presupposed.

1) It is as Father that God creates, in the strict sense of *creatio ex nihilo*. And this activity of creating involves an imposing of-law: "the 'creature' as created stands to God as 'Creator' as the subject to the sovereign Law-giver" (het "schepsel" qua geschapen staat tot God qua "Schepper" als de onderdaan tot den soevereinen Wetgeve:r) « *ibid.* p. 41). It is as Creator that God gives the law, and this legislating or lawgiving activity is distinct from, although it is presupposed in, his other sovereign activities of speaking and guiding (*ibid.* p. 11). Furthermore, this creative, legislative activity refers exclusively, for Vollenhoven, to the primordial act of the creation of heaven and earth referred to in Genesis 1:1, not to the subsequent let-there-be's of the six days of creation (cf. *ibid.* p. 41, 73B).²

2) It is as Son that God speaks,

When the sovereign God addresses himself in speech (Zich sprekend.. .richt) to that which is created, he calls himself Logos after this activity (Rev. 19: 11-13 and John 1:1-14), a designation which the Scriptures also use for his activity in the beginning (John 1:1-3)" (*ibid.* p. 42).

We should note here that Vollenhoven uses the Greek word "Logos" as a technical term for the Second Person of the Trinity. Moreover, he distinguishes between Logos as Trinitarian Person and as "activity in the beginning," by which he means God's let-there,-be's of Genesis 1. This appears from the following quote:

The Logos-revelation is the speaking of God to that which already exists, in the first instance to the earth (Genesis 1:3ff) as to the undifferentiated state of the earthly (het aardisch praedifferente) in the second place -- after the process of evolving -- to determinate (bepaalde) creatures which have come forth out of the earth [the first time in Genesis 1.2 (read 1:22)], specifically e.g. to determinate animals (Genesis 1:22, 3:24), to determinate persons (Genesis 1:28), determinate angels (Job 1), a determinate body of water (Matthew 8:26) (*ibid.* pp. 41-42).

According to Vollenhoven's conception, God as Father first created "the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). "The heavens" in this sense is the home of the angels, about which we know very little (*ibid.* p. 14). The rest of the creation account deals with the earth, or "the earthly creature" (het aardisch geschapene) as Vollenhoven calls it. This is at first an undifferentiated mass, upon which the Spirit broods (*ibid.* p. 16). God now speaks to this his creature, i.e., he acts as Logos. This activity of God is called "Logos-revelation" and has two phases. First he calls into being, out of the "undifferentiated state of the earthly" the various creatures mentioned in Genesis 1 (light, the firmament, the sea and dry land, etc.) This process of coming forth out of the "earth" (involving not only the Logos-revelation, but also the guidance of the brooding Spirit) he calls "evolving". In the second phase the Logos-revelation is addressed to the distinct creatures which have evolved. Examples of this are the command to multiply which is given to Adam and Eve. It is striking that Vollenhoven includes here also God's speaking to the angels in Job 1, and the rebuke addressed [7]

² This distinction was traditionally designated by the terms *creatio prima* and *creatio secunda*; see H. Heppe, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche* (1861), pp. 139, 143-44. It was made much of by Vollenhoven's teacher Bavinck (see his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek II*, 439-41) and is found in many discussions of Genesis 1, including those of Keil-Delitzsch, A. Kuyper, G.C. Aalders, K. Schilder, and G.C. Berkouwer. English-speaking theologians who make the distinction are L. Berkhof (*Systematic Theology* (1941), p. 152), O.T. Allis (*God Spake to Moses* (1951), p. 9) and E.J. Young (*Studies in Genesis One* (1964), *passim*, e.g. pp. 38, 105).

by Jesus (the incarnate Logos) to the stormy waves in Matthew 8. It seems probable that Vollenhoven would include the other instances of a "cosmological word" under this second phase of the Logos-revelation.

If we keep in mind these two phases of the Logos-revelation (the cosmological fiat of Genesis 1 on the one hand, and the both cosmological and linguistic words of God which follow) we can understand Vollenhoven's reference to the Logos' "activity in the beginning" in the earlier quote. The distinction also illuminates Vollenhoven's cryptic reference to "those determinate (bepaalde) creatures to which the Logos addresses Himself in yet another way than by a word which called them into being (hewt tot aanzijn riep)" (ibid. p. 42). "Calling into being" here does not refer to primordial creation, but to the activity of the Logos whereby distinct ("determinate") creatures were called to evolve out of the undifferentiated earth.

There remains the question of how Vollenhoven sees the relationship of Logos to "word of God" and to "law". On the first he is clear and succinct: "The Word of God is the result of this sovereign activity (i.e. the Logos-revelation)" (ibid. p. 42). Elsewhere he speaks of the word as "precipitate (neerslag) of Logos-revelation" (ibid. p. 67). Clearly, then, "Logos-revelation" and "word of God" are related as activity to result. As an occasional equivalent of "word" as addressed to man Vollenhoven uses the expression "word-revelation" (e.g. ibid. p. 14). Both expressions are also used for the inscripturated (te boek gesteld) word (ibid. p. 9).

There is a separate, short subsection entitled "The relation of law and word of God". It consists of a single sentence, which may be literally translated: "These two stand to each other as the valid and the verbally made known law" (als de geldende en de in woorden bekendgemaakte wet) (ibid. p. 14). Vollenhoven's point is that the word of God (i.e., the result of Logos-revelation) is the formulation in words of the law which holds for creation. On the same page he calls the word "law-revealing and direction-pointing" (wet-onthullend en richting-wijzend). This means, as he repeatedly emphasizes, that the word of God presupposes the creation law, just as the guidance of the Spirit presupposes the word (ibid. p. 11 bis.).

3) It is as Spirit that God gives guidance (leiding) to all things. Vollenhoven writes:

God puts himself in yet another relationship to already existing creatures. Already Genesis 1 informs us that the Spirit hovered in a brooding way (broedend... zweefde) over the waters of the earth, that is, ..guided the evolving of the variously determinate creatures out of the undifferentiated earth which preceded this variety (de evolveering leidde van de onderling verscheiden bepaalde schepselen uit de aan deze verscheidenheid praedifferent aarde). Elsewhere we find that the Spirit causes older things to bring forth younger things (Ps. 104:30) (ibid. p. 42).

This is brought to bear on questions of modern atomic physics:

Recent investigations of matter have moreover brought to light, through the discovery of the splitting (splitsing) of atoms, how here too there are various [8] possibilities, which leave room for the sovereign guidance of the Spirit. (ibid).

This is somewhat obscure, but the reference may be to Heisenberg's account of the principle of indeterminacy, which was published in 1927. Vollenhoven seems to be saying that there is an analogy between the indeterminacy of subatomic physics and

the undifferentiated earth of Genesis 1. In both cases the Spirit guides to determinateness.

But this deals only with the guidance of the Spirit insofar as it was linked with the first phase of Logos-revelation: the cosmological let-there-be's of Genesis 1. But the Spirit also backs up the Logos in his second phase:

Putting himself behind the Logos (Zich achter den Logos stellend), he demonstrates the same character of Guide (Leider) in his work with those determinate creatures to which the Logos addresses Himself in yet another way than by a word which called them into being. For He guides them in a sovereign way also in their relationship with respect to this word of God.

The primary reference here, of course, is to the work of the Spirit in guiding human beings to obedience to God's word as recorded in Scripture. However, the implication of Vollenhoven's views is that obedience to the word is a fruit of the Spirit also outside of human life, for those other determinate creatures (like angels, animals and the stormy sea) to whom the Logos addresses Himself.

Just as "word of God" is the result of Logos-revelation, so Vollenhoven speaks of a result of the guidance of the Spirit, which he formulates literally as follows: "the being determined of the direction of that which is guided by Him" (het bepaald zijn der richting van het door Hem geleide) (ibid. p. 42). That is, when the Spirit guides a creature, this means that its direction is set. And "direction" here seems to mean the accomplishment of what the word says that the law requires, "Whereas the word is law-revealing and direction-pointing, guidance is direction-setting (richting-bepalend)" (ibid.).

All of the foregoing discussion is summed up in what Vollenhoven says about "the religious" (het religieuse) and "religion". He uses the former expression to describe that which "constitutes the concrete existence of things in the cosmos" (ibid. p. 41). More specifically, he means by this the full relation of creature to Creator--not only of creature as such to Creator as such (i.e., subjection to the creation law of the Father), but also of creature in its relation to the revelation of the Logos and the guidance of the Spirit. It is only when we have taken the latter two relations into consideration that we can grasp the full concreteness of things. Accordingly, Vollenhoven defines the religious as:

...the Spirit-guided functioning of things in their relation to that word of God which comes to them after their coming into existence (ontstaan) (ibid. p. 43).

He gives a parallel definition of "religion", which applies only to man:

[9] Therefore we can now define religion as the functioning of the existing human being as he is sovereignly guided by the Spirit with respect to word-revelation. Next to religion, then, there belongs the religious, the religious relation, which pertains to non-human things, albeit not in isolation from religion (ibid. p. 43, Vollenhoven's emphasis)

The full concreteness of creation therefore reflects the threefold activity of the triune God, and in the case of man constitutes his being in the image of God. (ibid.)

It is for this reason that the Covenant relation (which Vollenhoven defines as the correlation of Logos-revelation and religion) is more than the relation of creature to Creator as such. It is extremely instructive to see how Vollenhoven sketches the

historia revelationis of the Scriptures in terms of the progression of this correlation of Logos-revelation and religion, i.e., in terms of the history of the covenant (*ibid.* pp. 43-50).