
A pastor muses on Word and Spirit

Erik Pattison

A rainy day in EC1 found me mooching around the CLC shop casually hoping to find a cut-price christian classic and trying not to “tut-tut” at the shelves of overblown biography and psycho-pap. My eye settled on *The Word and the Spirit* co-authored by Paul Cain and RT Kendall and I quickly read a few pages. They were repeating the stale old cliché that we have to find a synthesis between the Spirit (tongues, healings, prophecies etc. plus spontaneity) and the Word (expository, doctrinally rigorous Bible study, preaching and application). This combination was something I had sought for a number of years until I finally decided that I was trying to balance two incompatible views of God and his dealings with the world, a decision largely forced on me by trying to expound 1 Corinthians to my congregation.

Your editor has asked me to read the whole book and to compare it with John Woodhouse’s essay “The preacher and the living Word”, chapter 3 of *When God’s voice is heard*. I am glad I read the whole Cain/Kendall book because there are a couple of interesting features in it. Firstly, it assumes that most church people have a deep ignorance of scripture (after all those renewals, restorings, revivals and refreshings?!) and, secondly, it is not optimistic about the future of the current charismatic tradition.

Cain and Kendall are expecting something new to happen. The great Post-charismatic era is coming and will be embodied in a new, holier mass movement of people passionately loyal to scripture and moving miraculously through the world converting vast numbers to Christ. I heard echoes of *The Puritan Hope* mixed with the Kansas City prophets’ description of a new kind of Christian. Cain/Kendall are hard on the current charismatics. They are merely Ishmael compared with the Post-charismatic Isaac. Like Ishmael they are under God’s grace in some way but not heirs of the promises made to the church. As an ex-charismatic I am familiar with the way our teachers used to adopt fantastic OT typology to serve the cause – we have all heard calls to “move on” and “inherit the land” of charismatic fullness. To read RT Kendall using the same technique to unsettle the charismatics was amusing. He seems to have impressed Colin Dye, Sandy Millar and others. It is a shame that the biblical Isaac is so colourless and dull compared with Abraham and Jacob (or even Ishmael). Still, every analogy can be pushed too far.

Turning to John Woodhouse was like stepping into a different world, the real one. He is addressing the error and confusion represented by the whole attempt to find a midway house between opposing spiritualities. To be fair, there are some like Cain/Kendall who are seeking something “beyond” – a new synthesis out of the interplay of thesis (Word) and antithesis (Spirit). But if Woodhouse is right we need to go back to a more thoroughgoing spirituality of the Word before we can make real progress.

Woodhouse believes God creates, sustains and interacts with this world by speaking words. Some of those words have been laid down in Scripture and, by extension, those words live in the mouths of Gospel preachers. Every word which is truly from God is a spirit-filled word, powerful and active. He is keen to stress that the inspiration of scriptural words is a present tense experience rather than a simple past tense fact. Hence, the idea

that scripture is God-breathed in 2 Tim 3:16 means that God's breath (Spirit) is in it *now* and that is why it is so "useful". He points out the many verses where God's word is an active agent creating life and changing people and their world.

The Word is attributed with doing all the things Jesus promised would be done by the Holy Spirit. This apparent unity between the work of the Spirit and the work of the Word leads to the conclusion that the Word is the Spirit's only chosen method of implementing the Kingdom of God. The fruit of Christ's great work will come only through the work of the Word. After reading the essay, 1 Peter 4:11a was firmly lodged in my mind: "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God".

The preacher's job is to be a conduit and servant of the Word. The teaching ministry is not therefore to do with the collection and dissemination of spiritual data. Our business is to hear God's voice (which is the scripture) and become, like John the Baptist, a voice. The elders of the church are a Public Address system through which the breath of God changes the world. God humbles Himself and tolerates the harmonic distortion, negative feedback and clipped dynamics we provide and speaks as we speak. We are not free to add applications or interpretations to His Words and we certainly have no right to add what we think is lacking. We take the Word and get it in any way we can to contact people, confident in its inherent power.

Woodhouse would find little or no room in his thinking for the idea of the "anointing" that has played such a large part in the lives of many preachers. The Word of God simply is the power of God whether we are aware of the power or not. I have to admit that my own experience is that I am usually unaware when my words are having a saving or life changing effect on my hearers. Furthermore, I have sometimes felt "anointed" without the sermon seeming to have any lasting effect.

Most of the supernatural or paranormal phenomena that mean so much to charismatics are not treated as relevant by Woodhouse. Presumably they are not the unique work of the Spirit but just the work of angels or psychic forces (or worse?). For him there is no balance to be sought between the work of the Spirit and the work of the Word because they are one and the same. I have a terrible feeling I am not being fair to Woodhouse's depth. Read him for yourself. I am 90% convinced. In any case he seems to be barking up the right tree.

By comparison, Cain and Kendall are just barking in the dark. For some time I have been concerned that key charismatic ideas about spiritual warfare, prayer and personal anointings had been borrowed from paganism or sacramentalism rather than learnt from scripture. These ideas have entered the evangelical mainstream. Ask your friends what they think it means to "listen to God" or "struggle against evil" or "be in the Spirit" and the answers might surprise you. The truth seems to be that if there is no work of the Word then there is no work of the Spirit beyond common Grace. We would only be left with sorcery on one hand and theologising on the other. As Woodhouse points out, marrying those two might breed a monster.

"When God's voice is heard" IVP 1995, Ed. Green & Jackman £9.99 ISBN 0-85110-656-0
"The Word and the Spirit" Kingsway 1996, Cain & Kendall £3.99 ISBN 0-85476-413-5

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