

# God's Powerful Words: Five Principles of Biblical Spirituality in Isaiah 55

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## Introduction

Biblical spirituality is based on the conviction that God has spoken to us, and has made use of human words as the means of his powerful, effective, and productive verbal communication. The powerful, active, and creative God has chosen to use human words, and to achieve his purposes through them.

The Bible uses a variety of graphic images to convey the reality of God's power. God's "right hand and holy arm" achieve salvation (Ps 98:1); the "eyes of the LORD" always watch over his land (Deut 11:12); to ask God to "turn your ear to me" is to ask him to hear and answer prayer (Ps 31:2). So to "hear the word of the LORD" is to listen to "the words of his mouth" (Jer 9:20). The words of God powerfully achieve his purpose. As King Solomon claimed, "Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses" (1 Kgs 8:56).

Confidence in the power of God's words is fundamental to Christian spirituality, as it is also fundamental to Christian ministry. If God's words are powerful and effective, then we must hear them and receive God's sustaining and transformative power.<sup>1</sup> If God's words are powerful and effective, then we must make good use of them to achieve effective ministry.<sup>2</sup>

Our focus here is on the power of God's words to create and sustain believers. It is the crucial and universal message from the Old Testament that Jesus Christ

applied to himself in the desert, when tempted to turn stones into bread: "It is written, 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt 4:4; from Deut. 1:12). Biblical spirituality means hearing words from the mouth of God.

We have a moral duty to pay attention to the words of others, to try to enter their world of meaning rather than staying in our own, to discipline our hearing and concentration so that we not only hear their words, but listen as well for the meaning and significance of those words to the person who is speaking.<sup>3</sup> This takes love, concentration, imagination, patience, and the humility to admit when we have misheard or misunderstood. We owe the same duty to God. Furthermore, the longer we have known someone, the more attentively we have listened to them in the past, and the more patience and love we have for them, the more likely we are to understand the meaning of their words to us. So it is with God. Of course we may get it wrong, we may be deaf to what God says to us in the Scriptures, we may misconstrue God's meaning, but the fact that we may often misunderstand does not mean that we can never understand.<sup>4</sup> Our duty and joy is to hear, receive, and obey the words that God has spoken to us in Scripture, so that God accomplishes his good purpose through and in our lives. In the words of Jeremiah Burroughs, "[W]e should listen as much to the voice of God in the ministry of His Word as if...the

Lord should speak out of the clouds to us.”<sup>5</sup>

The theme of the powerful and fruitful word of the LORD is a key to Biblical spirituality, and is also a key to the book of Isaiah, and we see it especially clearly in Isaiah 55. We should derive the shape of our spirituality from the Bible, and Isaiah 55 is a notable source. This chapter describes biblical spirituality in microcosm, and so sheds light on biblical spirituality in general, and on the whole of the Bible. In it we find five principles of biblical spirituality:

- (1) The Invitation (vv. 1-3)
- (2) The Basis of the Invitation (vv. 3-5)
- (3) The Problem That Frustrates the Invitation (vv. 6-9)
- (4) The Solution to This Problem (vv. 10-11)
- (5) The Promise That the Solution Will Be Effective (vv. 12-13).

### **The Invitation**

“Come, all you who are thirsty.”  
“Come, buy and eat.” “Listen, listen to me.” “Give ear and come to me, hear me, that your soul may live” (vv. 1-3).

The chapter begins with the gracious invitation of God to “come” to him. This invitation expresses God’s plan to draw his people from exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem. It echoes similar words of invitation in this part of Isaiah:

- “Comfort, comfort my people” (40:1).
- “Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion” (52:1).
- “Sing, O barren one who did not bear...burst into song” (54:1).
- “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you” (60:1).

Here is the first principle of biblical spirituality. We come to God in response to his gracious invitation to come and listen to

him. The invitation to “come” to God lies at the heart of biblical spirituality. It is an invitation to a relationship, to a response to God, and a movement towards God. It is echoed in the call of Christ, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened” (Matt 11:28).

It is a gracious invitation because it is addressed to those who are “thirsty,” aware of their need; and to those who have no resources, “you who have no money, come buy and eat.” God has taken the initiative in his gracious invitation. The people do not deserve God’s grace: it is his free gift.

It is a verbal invitation, for how will they know to “come,” unless they hear the word of God through the prophet Isaiah? And to “come” is to “listen, listen to me,” to “give ear and come to me, and hear me, that your soul may live.” (55:1-3).

They must listen to God, in order to hear his invitation, command, and promise. How else will they know that they must leave Babylon under the gracious protection of God, if they do not hear his words of invitation and command? How else will we know to turn to God, to come to God, unless we hear and listen to the words of God?

The invitation to “come,” is also an invitation and command to “listen.” No coming without listening; no listening without coming. This invitation was graciously given in human words through the prophet Isaiah. Relationship to God and attentive listening to God’s words through the prophet were fundamental to the spiritual life of the people. The same is true of our spirituality.

### **The Basis of the Invitation**

The basis of the invitation is the promise of God that he will accomplish

his covenant with David: “I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David” (v. 3). In Oswalt’s words,

God had made irrecoverable promises to David. As he kept those promises, Israel could participate in the blessings. As David experienced God’s *certain mercies* [utterly dependable acts of covenant love—*hesed*], so Israel could participate in them as well.<sup>6</sup>

David was dead, and it looked as if God’s promises to David had failed: there was no descendant of David ruling God’s people in Jerusalem, and the nations had triumphed over them. Yet the covenant promise of God would still be fulfilled, and that word of promise spoken to David so many years ago still remained as the basis of the return of the people of God to Jerusalem, and to the fulfilment of God’s gospel plan to bring the nations to see the future splendour of God among his people (vv. 4, 5).

Here is the second principle of biblical spirituality. God’s invitation was not a last minute invention, a spur of the moment idea. It was based on God’s long term covenant plan which he had originally promised to David, and which one day would be fulfilled in the coming and reign of Jesus Christ. So God’s promise to David was fulfilled in God’s word to his people in Isaiah 55, and was to be further fulfilled in the coming of Christ.

The invitation to come to God in coming from Babylon to Jerusalem was based on the promise of God, the character of God, the work of God, God’s power to use people and nations to achieve his will, and on his forgiveness—his forgiveness through the saving work of his servant. What his words achieve in his people, his words achieve for his people. The great

work of God was to bring his people back to Jerusalem. They would benefit from God’s great work as they responded to his present invitation based on his past promises. They were summoned by God’s cumulative verbal revelation. The invitation to “come” and to “listen” is based on God’s ancient covenant promised to David, recorded in the Scriptures, which God now promised to fulfil in the life of God’s people. What God had promised in former days, he would now fulfil.

### **The Problem That Frustrates the Invitation**

- “Seek the LORD”, “call on him”, “let the wicked forsake his way, and the evil man his thoughts”, “turn to the LORD” (vv. 6, 7).
- “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my way” (v. 8).
- “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (v. 9).

The people of God had heard God’s gracious words before in his promises to David, and yet had disobeyed them, and turned away from David’s God and their God. So to the words “come” and “listen,” the prophet must add “seek” and “forsake,” “wicked” and “evil” ways. Here is an essential element in biblical spirituality: to “come” is to “listen,” and those who “come” and “listen” must also “seek,” “forsake,” and “turn” from “wicked ways” and “evil thoughts.” Any attempt to obey and respond to God’s invitation to come to him and listen to him must face the vast gap between the thoughts and ways of God, and our thoughts and ways—a gap caused by our wickedness and evil. Sin is the enemy of true spirituality as surely as false spirituality is a sign of our sin. As Jonathan Edwards has shown, there are many false forms of spirituality that are

only the product of thoughts and ways that are far from God.<sup>7</sup>

The people of God are in exile because of their sinfulness and their sins, and those sins are sins of failing to hear and obey God's words given in the law and in the prophets: "They mocked God's messengers, despised his words, and scoffed at his prophets" (2 Chron 36:16). So coming to God and listening to God was not as easy as it sounded, when their universal pattern has been to mock, despise and scoff at God's words and messengers.

We cannot come or listen unless we also seek him, forsake our wicked and evil thoughts, and turn to the LORD. Repentance is integral to our relationship with God while we are in this present age, and there is no "cheap grace,"<sup>8</sup> no coming and listening without forsaking our ways, and turning from our ways to God.

Notice too the immensity of the problem, the great gulf between our thoughts and actions, and God's thoughts and actions: "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (v. 9). Furthermore, through the prophet, God carefully mentions his own thoughts and ways before the thoughts and ways of the people. This is because God's thoughts and ways are definitive, and set the standard for us. We should think God's thoughts after him, and follow his ways. But there is an immeasurable gulf between God and ourselves. No wonder Israel found it difficult to come to God and to listen to God; no wonder we find it difficult to come to God and to listen to God. And it is not enough to "forsake wicked ways and evil thoughts," the people must "turn to the LORD," in order to find "mercy" and "free pardon."

Here is the third principle of biblical

spirituality, namely our impotence, our inability to bridge the gap. How then can humans know and serve God? How can the great gulf between God's thoughts and actions and our thoughts and actions be bridged? How can we listen to God when his thoughts and ways are in heaven, and our thoughts and ways are earthbound and sinful? Here is the great dilemma of our attempts at spirituality, our attempts to draw near to God. We cannot climb from earth to heaven, from our thoughts and ways to God's thoughts and ways, by our effort. We cannot achieve it by repentance and good works, nor by intellectual or rational thought, nor by our intuition, nor by exercising our innate spirituality, nor by mystic experiences, nor by common sense. How, then, can the gulf be bridged?

### **The Solution to This Problem**

"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (vv. 10, 11).

It is the word of God that bridges the gap between divine and human reality, between heaven and earth, between God's thoughts and our thoughts, between God's ways and our ways. It goes out from God's mouth to achieve his saving purpose. It is as powerful, effective, and fruitful as the rain and snow that come down from heaven and "water the earth and [make] it bud and flourish, so that it yields sufficient seed for the sower, as well as bread for the eater (vv. 11, 10).

In v. 9, the theme is that of distance and contrast between heaven and earth,

between God and his people: “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” This gap is not because they are merely human, but because they are wicked and unrighteous (v. 7). Our problem is not our humanity, our finitude, but our sinfulness. It is not our humanity that is the barrier to true spirituality, but our flawed humanity, our sin. We have abandoned God’s thoughts and ways for our own thoughts and ways, far removed from God. All praise to God, who bridges the vast gulf between his thoughts and ways, and our thoughts and ways, by his word!

So while the first illustration from nature shows the gap between God and his sinful people, the second illustration shows how God bridges the gap by his powerful and effective word. God has drawn near in his word, so they should seek him “while he may be found,” and call upon him “while he is near” (v. 6). As Motyer comments, “The second natural illustration turns on a different relationship between earth and heaven.... The parallel between the life agency of rain and the effective word is exact.... The word of God is the unfailing agent of the will of God.”<sup>9</sup>

The cosmic effects of God’s words are reflected in the comparison between rain and snow, and the word of God, in vv. 10, 11.

- The rain and snow “come down from heaven” (v. 10), so does “my word...that goes out from my mouth” (v. 11).
- The rain and snow “do not return... without watering the earth” (v. 10), so God’s word “will not return to me empty” (v. 11).
- The rain and snow not only water the earth, but do so purposefully and effectively, “making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the

sower and bread for the eater” (v. 10), so God’s word achieves all that he intends, “it will accomplish what I desire, and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (v. 11).

Here is a fourth vital principle of biblical spirituality. The word of God will not only communicate present reality, that is, that God’s people are far distant from God, but will also effect and bring about a change in that reality, as God brings his people to repentance as they hear and obey his words of invitation and covenant promise. God’s word bridges the gap. Oswalt writes, “God has come *near* his people, not only in the work of the Servant that has been predicted, but also in the preaching of the prophet throughout the book.”<sup>10</sup> “It is because *what* God says is the truth that the word *will* perform exactly what God intends.”<sup>11</sup>

Notice also the way in which the power of the word of God is asserted both negatively, “It will not return to me empty,” and also positively, “but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (v. 11). It is never ineffective; it is always effective. It is never powerless; it is always powerful. God’s word never has to repent of failure!

The word of God is the means by which he makes himself close to his people, and makes his salvation effective in their lives. Calvin comments,

Thus also Moses recalled the people to the knowledge of God. “Say thou not, Who shall ascend to heaven? ... The word is nigh, in thy mouth and in thy heart.” [Deut. 30:12]. “That is,” saith Paul, “the word of faith which we preach” [Rom. 10:8].<sup>12</sup>

God graciously bridges that hermeneutical and epistemological gap by his word, which comes from heaven to earth, never fails, and always achieves its purpose.

God's gospel word bridges the gap, reflecting Christ's descent from heaven to earth for our salvation. God made the journey. God came down into the world of our frailty and sinfulness. As the gospel is the power of God for salvation to all who believe, so the word of God will not fail. For Christ has overcome sin, won forgiveness, and given us free and confident access to God the Father. True spirituality is gospel-shaped, and is founded on that grace on which we stand in Christ Jesus. "[B]y spiritual things [Paul] means the things of the Spirit of God, and things which the Holy Ghost teacheth."<sup>13</sup>

### **The Promise That the Solution Will Be Effective**

The promise that the solution will be effective, that God's word will achieve his purpose, is expressed both in the imagery of the fertility and prosperity achieved by the rain of God's word, and in the result of that fertile power in the return of God's people from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem.

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off (vv. 12, 13).

God's word is not ineffective, powerless, or sterile, but effective, powerful, and fertile.

So the power of the word of God is of central importance in this chapter. It is not a call to come to God, as if human effort is all that is needed. The call of God is an effective call. It is a call or invitation, that

is, it comes in the form of words (vv. 1, 2). It is effective because it is based on the hope of an everlasting covenant—the covenant made with King David (vv. 3-5). It is effective because God's prophetic word will not return empty, but will accomplish and succeed in achieving God's purpose of bringing his people to receive all that God offers. They will come, listen, seek, call on him, forsake their wicked ways, and turn to their merciful and pardoning God (vv. 1-7). It is effective, even though the minds and hearts of the people are so far away from God's mind and heart (vv. 8, 9). It is effective, because the cosmic results of God's promise and word, and of the people's repentance, are promised and foretold by God in a powerful promise of abundant fertility (vv. 12, 13).

Furthermore, the word of God that comes out of God's mouth in human words comes to his people and to us from the human mouth of the prophet Isaiah. God not only deigns to use human words, but to have them heard and read from the mouth and pen of the prophet. As Calvin comments,

The word *goeth out of the mouth* of God in such a manner that it likewise "goeth out of the mouth" of men; for God does not speak openly from heaven, but employs men as his instruments, that by their agency he may make known his will.<sup>14</sup>

Here is the double condescension of God, the overwhelming grace of God, that he not only uses human words, but also places them in human mouths and pens, that humans may hear, trust, and know him in his saving acts.

When we see Isaiah 55 in its context in the whole book of Isaiah, we learn that this theme of the efficacy and power of God's word is of fundamental importance.<sup>15</sup> As their partial fulfilment gives the people

hope in trusting God's present promises, so also God's present promises and powerful words will also mean the more complete fulfilment of those covenant promises from the past.<sup>16</sup>

For the same theme of the power of the word of God is found in Isaiah 40:6-8. Here the invitation is found in God's words, "Comfort," "speak," and "cry" or "proclaim." The words are addressed to God's people in exile in Babylon, and also addressed to the prophet who will take these words to God's people ("What shall I cry?" [v. 6]). And what is the basis for a message of comfort? They can trust God's word, for though "the people are grass . . . the word of our God will stand forever" (vv. 6, 8).

Furthermore, there is a clear contrast between the destructive force of "the breath of the LORD" in v. 7, and "the word of our God" in v. 8. In vv. 6-7, the inconstant and ephemeral people are like grass that withers and fades, but this fragility also derives from the breath or wind of God, as when a hot wind devastates grassland. However if the breath or wind of the LORD means destruction in v. 7, the word of our God means hope in v. 8. For if the people are inconstant, God is constant; if the people are mortal, God is unchanging; if the people are ephemeral, the word of our God will stand forever.

God's word brings effecting life-giving and abundant fertility, so that God's promises will be achieved in and through his people. The fertile energy lies in God's word, not in our imaginations, our creativity, our emotions, or our searching. God's words are "living oracles" (Acts 7:38), which are also life-giving words. In the words of John Gill, Christ's sheep will hear

the voice of Christ, the great and

good shepherd, in the gospel and in his ministers; which is a voice of love, grace, and mercy; a voice of peace, pardon, righteousness, life, and salvation by Christ; a soul-quickening voice, a very powerful one, a soul-charming, a soul-alluring voice; a comforting and rejoicing one, and therefore very desirable to be heard...blessed are the people that hear and know this joyful sound.<sup>17</sup>

This theme of the fertile power of God's word is common throughout the Bible. For the word and gospel of God is living, active, powerful, and fertile:

- "The word of truth, the gospel, that has come to you . . . is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world . . . it has been bearing fruit among your selves" (Col 1:5, 6).
- "You have been born anew . . . through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet 1:23).
- "He gave us birth by the word of truth. . . . Welcome with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls" (Jas 1:18, 21).
- "The sower sows the word. . . . [T]he kingdom of God is as someone sowed seed upon the ground. . . . [T]he kingdom of God is like a mustard seed" (Mark 4:14, 26, 31).

We may describe this in theological terms as the power of God in "the word of God" (the gospel) in "the words of God" (the Bible).

So the Bible is a "means," not a bare sign. The Bible is God's words intrinsically and, therefore, also instrumentally. It not only points out where God's power is used, for example, in a healing or nature miracle, but is also a means of God's power at work in our world. Here is the fifth principle of biblical spirituality, that God's words are powerful, fruitful, and effective.

Here is Thomas Cranmer's tribute to the power of Bible words:

For the Scripture of God is the heav-

enly meat of our souls: the hearing and keeping of it makes us blessed, sanctifies us, and makes us holy: it turns our souls; it is a light to our feet: it is a sure, steadfast and everlasting instrument of salvation: it gives wisdom to the humble and lowly-hearted: it comforts, makes glad, cheers, and cherishes our consciences.<sup>18</sup>

Again Cranmer reminds us of the power of the Scriptures:

The words of Holy Scripture are called the words of everlasting life; for they are God's instruments, ordained for the same purpose. They have power to turn through God's promise, and they are effectual through God's assistance; and being received in a faithful heart, they have a heavenly spiritual working in them.<sup>19</sup>

When Kevin Vanhoozer writes about "God's mighty speech-acts," he uses modern speech-act theory to explain a doctrine of scripture.<sup>20</sup> So the Bible contains the varied speech-acts of the personal God. As Calvin comments,

*God is true*, not only because he is prepared to stand faithfully to his promises, but because he also really fulfils whatever he declares; for he so speaks, that his command becomes a reality.<sup>21</sup>

God's words are effective secondary causes. God is the primary cause of everything in the universe. Sometimes he works without using human language. Sometimes he uses human language as a "secondary cause" to achieve his will. He is so great and powerful that he can use human words without endangering his transcendence. His words achieve his relational and revelatory purposes. God's effective "secondary causes" can be described as God's "instruments." Calvin writes, "The word is the instrument by which the Lord dispenses the illumination

of the Spirit to believers."<sup>22</sup> Indeed the words of God convey the power of God so completely that we can claim that God is present in his speech, in his words, as he is present in his other actions.

There is an unhelpful strand of teaching in both theology and spirituality, which claims that God's revelation happens independently of words, and that words are either just God's pointers to that non-verbal revelation, or else merely human attempts to make sense of that non-verbal revelation. Karl Barth held that revelation happened independently of the words of the Bible.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, John Spong teaches, "[the] Bible is the means by which I hear, confront, interact with the Word of God. No, the words of the Bible are not for me the words of God."<sup>24</sup>

What a contrast to Jesus' claim, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life," and to Peter's reply, "You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:63, 68). The Bible is revelation, and not just a witness to revelation. In the words of Austin Farrer, "The inspiration is to be found in the very words and nowhere else."<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

What, then, have we learned about Biblical spirituality from Isaiah 55?

- (1) *The invitation.* We come to God in response to his gracious verbal invitation to come to him and to listen to his words.
- (2) *The Basis.* The invitation to "come" and to "listen" is based on God's covenant promises, recorded in the Scriptures.
- (3) *The Problem.* Our thoughts and ways are far removed from God's thoughts and ways, because of our sinfulness. We are powerless to climb from earth to heaven.
- (4) *The Solution.* God's word comes from heaven to earth, never fails, and always achieves its purpose.

(5) *The Promise*. God's words are powerful, fruitful, and effective and will produce an abundant harvest of gospel fruit.

For contemporary Christians it is important to remember that God's words through Isaiah remain his powerful words today. God's words in the mouth of his prophet, and in his writings, are powerful and effective. Those same words remain powerful today in our lives, as also in our mouths as we use them to challenge, encourage, or rebuke others, whether believers or not yet believers. These words remain the living and active words of God. "For 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.' That word is the good news that was announced to you" (1 Pet 1:24, 25).

God's human words, given through his prophet, and written down for his people during and after the exile, were also written down and preserved for us, for, "everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4). So let us heed this warning and encouragement: "See to it that you do not refuse the one who is speaking . . . the one who warns from heaven" (Heb 12:25).

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Peter Adam, *Hearing God's Words* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>See Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

<sup>4</sup>See Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Pres-*

*ent Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship* (1648; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), 210.

<sup>6</sup>John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 438.

<sup>7</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1986).

<sup>8</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959), 35-47.

<sup>9</sup>J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 457, 458.

<sup>10</sup>Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 442-43.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid*, 446, n. 61.

<sup>12</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah in Calvin's Commentaries* (22 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 8:170.

<sup>13</sup>Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, 126.

<sup>14</sup>Calvin, *Isaiah*, 8:172.

<sup>15</sup>Barry Webb has shown how the theme of chapter 54 is that of, "Every promise fulfilled," as we see God's covenant promises through Abraham (vv. 1-3), at the exodus (vv. 4-8), and his covenant with the nations through Noah (vv. 9-17) will yet reach their complete fulfillment (Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996], 215, 216).

<sup>16</sup>Again, as Webb observes, "The resounding affirmations of the power of God's word in 40:6-8 and 55:10-11 form a kind of bracket around the whole of chapters 40-55" (*ibid*, 218).

<sup>17</sup>John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: or A System of Evangelical Truths Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures* (1769; repr., Paris, AR: Baptist

Standard Bearer, 1987), 933.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Cranmer, "The First Part of the Exhortation to the Reading of Holy Scripture," in *Certain Sermons or Homilies* [London: SPCK, 1864], 3.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 3, 4.

<sup>20</sup>Kevin Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today," in *A Pathway into the Holy Scriptures* (ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 143-81).

<sup>21</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans*, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, 19:116.

<sup>22</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:96.

<sup>23</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse—Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995), 63-74.

<sup>24</sup>John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 249.

<sup>25</sup>Austin Farrer, *Interpretation and Belief* (London: SPCK, 1976), 12.