

Alive and Active God's Word in the Nigerian Context¹

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Preamble

Pope Benedict XVI declared October 2007 - October 2008 as the Year of the Word. This Year climaxed in the Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October this year,² with the theme, *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*. All Christ's Faithful in parishes and dioceses expectedly studied the *Lineamenta* and gave input for the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod. The impact of this synodal process was not greatly felt in Nigeria, though the Catholic Secretariat (CSN) produced a simplified version of the *Lineamenta* for easy comprehension by the faithful.³ As its contribution to this synodal process, the Missionary Society of St. Paul (MSP) organized its 2008 "Annual St. Paul Lecture" on the synod theme. The Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA) similarly chose for its Nineteenth Theology Week (March 10-14, 2008) the theme: "The Word of God and Meeting the Millennium Goals in Africa". CIWA felt that God's word needed to be brought to bear on the UN efforts to meet its eight-point millennium goals by 2015 and beyond.⁴

The inspired theme of my presentation at the Annual St Paul Lecture, "Alive and Active", became the inspiration for the theme of this our inaugural convention of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria. The invitation to give that lecture gave me a singular opportunity to reflect in-depth on God's word and to share with the audience and now at this our CABAN conference the insights I received from the Holy Spirit on the active nature of God's word in Nigeria, Africa, and the world at large. I have no doubt that the birth of our Association itself is God's gift to us to mark this Year of the Word. To God be the glory.

I emphasize that this presentation is essentially a personal reflection, not a "scientific" study. During the Great Jubilee of our Lord, the late John Paul II reflecting on the life and mission of the Church in the past two thousand years asked us his "Brothers and Sisters" (Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful) to reflect on what the Jubilee signified for us with reference to this mission and to share the same with others.⁵ In his unique reflection, the Pope observed that for the past 2000 years we have, as it were, been fishing all night, catching nothing. At the dawn of this New Millennium, we are to see and hear Jesus standing on the shore (as he did in Luke 5:1-11), inviting us (as he invited Peter and his companions) to pair out our nets into the deep (*Duc in altum*) for the catch of the century.⁶ Nowhere perhaps in our Nigerian/African context is the need to launch into the deep more pressing than in this issue of God's word (the Bible). Following

¹This paper was originally presented as the "Annual St. Paul Lecture" Gwagwadala, Abuja, FCT, 26 January 2008, ten months before the Synod took place. It was slightly revised for the Inaugural Convention of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN), 30 April – 3 May, 2008 and is here in this published version very slightly revised to reflect that the Synod has actually taken place.

² The *Lineamenta* published by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007), was reproduced by the Biblical Apostolate Unit of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Abuja and Lagos.

³ The Simplified Version was produced by lecturers of the Catholic Institute of West Africa.

⁴ The eight millennium goals are: to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development.

⁵ John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte. At the Dawn of the New Millennium. To the Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001), esp. nos. 1.

⁶ See in particular, nos. 1, 15, and 58 of the Letter.

the Pope's injunction, I too ask each of you, "my Brothers and Sisters",⁷ to reflect along with me as I share my insights on God's word in our own contexts, and in turn to share yours with me and all of us during the discussion period.

The reflection has three main parts: word as being alive and active by nature, the word seen from God's and Jesus' perspectives (God-Word Incarnate; John 1:14) and God's word in our contemporary Nigerian and African contexts. This last aspect is the most challenging, though it is the least noticed in today's popular preoccupation with what "the word of God" or "the Bible says" or does not say.

1. Word by Nature Is Alive and Active

The phrase "alive and active" in the title of this presentation is from the Letter (or Epistle, as one may prefer) to the Hebrews:⁸

The word of God is something alive and active: it cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword; it can seek out the place where the soul is divided from the spirit, or the joints from the marrow; it can pass judgment on secret emotions and thoughts. No created thing is hidden from him; everything is uncovered and stretched fully open to the eyes of the one to whom we must give account of ourselves (Heb 4:12-13; NJB).

This much quoted passage arguably sums up the nature of word in general. Not only God's word, but word by its very nature is something alive and active. It is alive because the one who speaks seeks an active response from the addressee. Can we think of any action which was not occasioned by word, spoken or written? Take our gathering, for instance; the word of the organizers of this convention and our response to it brought us all together here. The word of an institution on the opening or closing date of its sessions makes students and parents act appropriately. The word of a company, that there would be interview on a given date and time, sends the interviewees speeding with zeal to the exercise. Examples are endless, as I noted in my commentary on "John".⁹ It is impossible to think of an action that was not occasioned by word, spoken or written. Word may not receive the expected response; that does not make it ineffective by itself. As in the case of the word of the sower in the parable (Matt 13:10-15) even a negative response is itself a response, a personal choice to ignore it. Thus God kept sending prophets to his people, even when they staunchly refused to listen;¹⁰ because whether heard/received or not, word does what it signifies. Word by its nature is active, welcome or not.

From the Genesis creation narratives we learn that first was the word, not the life.¹¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Before that there was nothing; or when God first created the earth, the earth was "a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep". Then God's Spirit

⁷ It is heartwarming that the Pope in this Letter constantly refers to all Christ's Faithful: Bishops, clergy, religious and lay faithful as his brothers and sisters; see nos. 3, 26, 42, 57, 59; in contrast to the usual practice of addressing mainly or only "my brother Bishops".

⁸ For a succinct distinction between Letter and Epistle, see John C. Hurd, "Letters in the New Testament", in *International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*; William R. Farmer et alii, eds. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 1546-1552, esp. 1546-1547.

⁹ Teresa Okure, "John", in *International Bible Commentary*, 1438-1505; Farmer et alii, eds., especially the section on John 1:1-14, 1459-1460.

¹⁰ Cf. Isa 9-13; incidentally this same passage is quoted by Matthew 13:14-15 in the context of why Jesus speaks to the people in parables.

¹¹ This observation may sound like a contradiction of my earlier article "First was the life not the book" in Teresa Okure, ed., *To Cast Fire Upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today's Multi-National Global Context*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000), but in effect it does not since the issue in this other work is not word as word, but the relation between life and the events narrated in the Bible.

hovered over the primeval waters to bring about life: “God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light” (Gen 1:1-3). Life came to be as a result of the word. This applies not only in the first creation account (Gen 1:1-2:4a), but also in the second (Gen 2:4b-24) which climaxes in the creation of the woman; in her creation God also deliberated and spoke (Gen 2:18), as God did in the first. John’s Gospel rightly proclaims: “In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God; and the Word was God . . . In him there was life . . . and all that came to be had life through him” (John 1:1-4). When God uttered the divine word, God put the entire divine self into it since God does not exist or grow in bits as human beings do. What God spoke was God-Word: “the Word was God”; the first Christians and Fathers of the Church recognized this long ago.

Word has the power to destroy, blame, generate quarrels and fights; or to build, celebrate, affirm, console, instruct and praise. What it does depends largely on the motive of the speaker and the reception by the one to whom it is spoken. When God sent Jeremiah “to knock down and to destroy, to build and to plant”, Jeremiah had only one instrument for this mission: the prophetic word which he learned to speak, child though he was (Jer 1:2-3, 6-10), and continued to speak well into old age.¹² Before him Moses (Exod 4:10-17; 6:10-13) and the OT prophets, had similar experiences. Isaiah was missioned to use the prophetic word to “blind” the eyes, “deafen” the ears and “make dull” the hearts of the people (Isa 6:10-13).¹³ No human word is ever neutral to the recipient, much less God’s word. Whether one receives it positively or negatively, one cannot but be affected by it; ignoring it is still a response; and in such cases word becomes judgment. This is particularly true of God’s word (John 12:48). The fate of the rich man in the parable of Dives and Lazarus and the fear that the same might befall his brothers (Luke 16:19-31) demonstrates the judgment nature of the rejected word: “They have Moses and the prophets . . . If they do not listen to them, they will not listen even if one should rise from the dead”.

This intrinsic nature of word as alive and active has challenges for us as speakers and hearers in our daily interactions. Scripture tells us that we were created in God’s “image and likeness” (Gen 1:26-27). We image God most by our ability to speak or voice out what is within us. We therefore have great responsibility for how we use words, for as Jesus says, our words are evidence of who we are, and on judgment day each of us will be held accountable for every word we utter (cf. Matt 12:33-37).

2. Word in God’s Perspective: The Bible and God-Word Incarnate

The Bible, God’s inspired word, taken summatively is the proclamation of God’s good news to humanity; it guides, warns and teaches us what to do or not do, if we are to enter into God’s rest. The author of 2 Timothy reminds us that “All Scripture is inspired [*theopneustos*, “inbreathed”] by God and is useful for teaching, refuting error, for correcting and training in Christian life” (3:16). Seen thus the Bible is like the “*Owner’s Manual*” of any product (a car or computer, for instance). It is the Owner’s Manual God gives to humanity to provide it with sure instruction on who we are (our true identity as God’s creatures and children); what God intends us and our world to be; and how we are to conduct ourselves in this world if we are to be true to our God-given identity and destiny: people created in God’s own image and likeness and recreated even more wonderfully in the Son through our new birth as God’s children, whereby we become “heirs of God and coheirs with Christ” (Rom 8:14-17).¹⁴

The Letter to the Hebrews (on the living, active and all exposing nature of God’s word; 4:12-13) recalls how the same God, who in former times spoke to us through the prophets, now, speaks to us through

¹² Jeremiah outlived a number of Israel’s kings: from the reign of Josiah to the deportation into Babylon, 608-587BC.

¹³ In the Hebrew these verbs are hiphil or causative. Because word is active by nature, the negative response it receives from the people has a hardening effect on them. Thus Jesus says of the Jewish leaders, “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been at fault, but now they have no excuse for their sin” (John 15:22). See further John 9:41.

¹⁴ On our sonship and daughtership of God see further: Gal 4:23-28; John 1:12-13; 1 John 1:1-4; 3:1-4; Heb 12:22).

the Son, whom God has appointed heir of all things (Heb 1.1). Preceding this passage (4:12-13) is the author's discourse on God's sabbatical rest after the six-day work of creation (Gen 2:1-3) and his exhortation to his audience to make concerted effort to enter into God's rest; not to be like those Jews in the wilderness who by refusing to submit to God (hear and keep God's word) forfeited their entry into the Promised Land (Heb 3:7-4:11). Following the passage is another exhortation to approach God's throne of grace with confidence because Jesus, our High Priest, God-Word who became like us in all things except sin (4:15), is ever living in God's very presence to intercede ceaselessly for us, and dispense God's graces (absolutely unmerited free gifts) to us. The path to God's throne of mercy is one of suffering, in the footsteps of Jesus himself. But this suffering, ability to endure everything to the end rather than give up on God or quit halfway, constitutes the only sure passage or entry into God's own rest (4:14-5:10).

Though God rested after the work of creation, the entry of sin into the world made God decide not to rest till, for our sake, God would destroy the power and domination of sin in human lives and society. This "restlessness" of God for our sake is the work of salvation, the history of which is recorded in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. God embarked on this restlessness at the very moment that humanity sinned, missed the mark, turned away from God by choosing to listen to (obey and keep the word of) the serpent tempter rather than God's (Genesis 3). At that very moment God vetoed the devil's action by announcing programmatically the good news of our salvation: God promised to put enmity between the woman and her seed which God himself would effect (Gen 3:15). As a result of this promise, the man named his wife Eve "because she was the mother of all who live" (3:20).¹⁵ The promise embraced the whole of humanity. The progressive fulfillment of the promises God made to subsequent characters, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob/Israel and the people of the Old Covenant is evidence of the living and active nature God's word throughout biblical history.

God's word is most uniquely alive and active in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God-Word become flesh (John 1:14), "Son of Mary" (Mark 6:3), our brother and Saviour of the World (John 4:42; Acts 4:12). His life, ministry, passion, death and resurrection, the sending of the Holy Spirit and commissioning of his disciples to proclaim this good news of salvation to the whole world (cf. Matt 28:19-20) and be his "witnesses" from Jerusalem, to "Judea, Samaria and indeed to earth's remotest end" (Acts 1:8; used as the leitmotif of the 1994 African Synod) evince his dynamic action as God-Word incarnate. God's work in and through him aims at the universal entry of all human beings greatly loved by God (John 3:16) into God's rest.

Word bares a person's mind or thought. John's Gospel (1:18) proclaims summatively that Jesus, God word-Incarnate, "the only begotten God" (*monogēnēs theos*), alone has uniquely revealed God. Jesus himself tells Philip that whoever has seen him has seen the Father also (John 14:9). As God-Word incarnate, he revealed God's goodness to humanity in action, by loving us unto death and resurrection (John 13:1-2). As Peter would say, he revealed the good God by going about "doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil" (Acts 10:38). His life-long agenda as one anointed (*echrisen*) by the Lord's Spirit as the Messiah (*Christos*) was:

to bring the good news [of liberation] to the poor, .
 proclaim liberty/release to captives and
 recovery of sight to the blind,
 to let the oppressed go free,
 to proclaim a year of favour [general amnesty] from the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).

¹⁵ As I have indicated in "Biblical Perspectives on Women: 'Eve, Mother of All the Living' (Gen 3:20)", (*Voices from the Third World*, Philippine Edition [1985] 17- 25) the man's naming of the woman as "mother of all who live" is his response to God's promise of life through the woman and her seed, at the very point when he himself is told that he would die and return to dust (Gen 3:19). It is therefore ironic that the name "Eve" (*hāvāh*) which means essentially life, from the same verb root word as God's own preferred name in the OT, "YHWH", should have gone down in history (through a legacy of the Fathers of the Church) as the name which brought death into the world.

In his life from the crib to the cross and resurrection, the sending of the Holy Spirit and the commissioning of the disciples; in his mission of teaching, speaking in parables, curing diseases, consoling the bereaved, reaching out to the marginalized and outcasts, challenging the unjust system and hypocritical religious practices of his people, God's word was and still is alive and active in the fullest sense. Jesus' actions as God-Word did not end with the ascension, the sending of the Holy Spirit and the commissioning of the disciples. He promised to be with us till end of time (Matt 28:20). In heaven where God has entrusted everything into his hands, he continues his ministry of intercession and dispensing God's graces to humanity. In the Eucharist, Bread of Life, he serves as our daily food and drink unto eternal life, the real or true life. As God-Word, he himself is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). As our intercessor and unique mediator with the Father, he is the "throne of grace" (Heb 4:16), not of fear, judgment and punishment.

In sum, both in Scripture and in Jesus the alive and active nature of God's word continues and endures eternally; all actions of God's word are intrinsically good and for the good of all. It cannot be overemphasized that from God's perspective and the actual evidence of Scripture, all God's deeds in Jesus are solely for the good of humanity; or, as the creed says, "For us and for our salvation". God works ceaselessly for our liberation from sin, our alienation from God. One of Jesus' last words on the cross was "Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). All this also has great challenges for us children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus who are configured to him by baptism (Can 849), as we will see later.

Jesus himself speaks of the active and enduring nature of his word. His word is "a rock" for one who accepts, hears and keeps or builds his house on it (Matt 7:24-25). "Heaven and earth may pass away, but my word will not pass away" (Matt 24:35). As in Isaiah's mission, Jesus' word has a hardening effect on those who hear and yet resist or reject it: "If I had not come they would not have been at fault", but now they have seen/heard and "hated both me and my Father" (John 16:22-23). His word has a cleansing effect on his disciples and on all believers (John 15:3). In the ministry of the Church, the cleansing, creative and life-sustaining nature of his word is best manifested in the sacraments all of which depend on effective word and symbolic action: "I baptize you, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", "This is my body given for you. . . do this in memory of me"; "I forgive you your sins . . ."; "I, Mary, take you, John, as my lawful husband . . ." and so forth. In all actions (liturgical or administrative) of the Church, Body of Christ, word plays a living and active role. The innate power of the word cannot be overemphasized.

God's Word in Images

The Bible has a multiplicity of ways of conveying the active and dynamic character of God's word. In Hebrew, "word" *dābār* (Greek *logos*) also translates "thing", "substance".¹⁶ Apart from the word of creation and the Word-Incarnate viewed briefly above, the Bible projects God's word as something essentially alive and active, that is, as having a life of its own. God's word is reported as coming to prophets (as in the call narratives); Amos "saw" (in vision) God's word (Amos 1:1). Similarly, 1 John speaks of having seen, heard, felt and touched "the word who is life" made physically manifest in Jesus (1 John 1:1-3). In his call and inaugural prophetic vision Ezekiel "ate" the entire scroll of the word by God's orders; though sweet in his mouth, it made his stomach sour (Ezek 3:1-3). He was to digest and assimilate the message he was to proclaim to others in its bitter/sweet character. This *personal* character of God's word is true even when it is expressed figuratively as "a hammer" that breaks and shatters rocks and "a fire" that consumes and transforms (Jer 23:29), in contrast to the empty words or dreams of the false prophets who run without God sending them, to tell lies to God's people (Jer 23:25-28). It is "a lamp for my feet and light for my path" for one devoted to studying and meditating daily on God's law (Ps 119:105). The word is "a

¹⁶ The same applies in Ibibio where it can be said *Iko aba* (Word has occurred), *Anie Iko* (One has a word, meaning "a case").

two-edged sword that cuts finely” (Heb 4:12). The Book of Wisdom attributes the massacre of Egypt’s firstborns to God’s “all-powerful Word”; it leapt from God’s royal throne, like a mighty warrior with a “sharp sword”, to deal death to doomed nation (Wisd 18:14-16).

In all these instances word is presented as acting on its own, on its own authority. In Isaiah 55:10, the divine word is a *messenger* that does not return empty to God but carries out all that it was sent to do. The Psalmist recalls that God “spoke and it was made; God commanded and it [creation] sprang into being”. All these images point to the fact that God’s word is not mere empty sound but action packed programme that conveys God’s will and ways to us and all humanity and requires our active response for our own good. The innate power, incisiveness and effectiveness of God’s word derive from the authority of the speaker, because word is an extension of the speaker. “The word that goes forth from my mouth”, God’s mouth, cannot return empty without doing what it was sent to do (Isa 55:11).

As we respond to the human word because of the dignity or status of the speaker, so are we required to give an uncompromising attention and response to God’s word. We obey human word with alacrity, if we view the speaker as an *oga* (chief, boss), even if it does not favour us. Unfortunately we very often do not think twice about ignoring God’s word though this word is solely for our good. “I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction” (Jer 29:11). God’s thoughts of peace flow into words of peace.

NT authors and Christians conceived of the word as something mobile, spreading from place to place, something which “grew”, “increased” and “waxed strong” (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). This is interesting. Was it the word that grew or was it the preachers who grew, increased and waxed strong? The preachers no doubt added their own distinctive understanding of the word as they preached it to their diverse audiences in the diverse contexts. Their participation both helped to spread the word; and any genuine effort to inculturate the word, to preach it in a way that concrete persons in their concrete socio-cultural locations can understand (as *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22 counsels), necessarily enlarges the word itself, even as the Incarnation has added something new to the Trinity.¹⁷ The more the number of people who received the gospel grew, the more the word increased by being alive in them. How today do we help the word to authentically grow, spread and wax strong in our own contexts?

3. Word in Nigerian/African Context

To say that God’s word is alive and active in Nigeria would be an understatement. The country is besieged by the explosive emphasis on God’s word today. This explosion promoted by TV evangelists and apostles with their plethora of programmes at prime time; through CDs and DVDs, advertisement on websites, revival programmes, posters and banners in streets and captions on motor vehicles such as “Jesus is Lord”; “Psalm 23”; “The just shall live by faith”. Even the celebrated series, “Africa Magic”, has a stint or two on biblical themes parodying the many revival crusades and prayer sessions in public arenas. Most of the mushroom churches that spring up almost on a daily basis claim the Bible as their authority. Inspired by the relatively older ones such as the Full Gospel Men’s Fellowship, Deeper Life and the Redeemed Church of Christ, these newer ones base themselves on a word or phrase of the Bible, regardless of whether or not the word chosen has the same meaning in the Bible as they give it. The phrase “born again Christian” seems to underlie all of these churches and movements.¹⁸

On the part of many Catholics the US-based series, “Thirty Days with Jesus”, has become a “Vade mecum”. The love of the Bible is such that even while at Mass, some prefer to read their Bible. Others may

¹⁷ I have elaborated on this dimension of the incarnation in “Inculturation: Biblical/Theological Bases”, in T. Okure, Paul van Thiel et alii, *32 Articles Evaluating the Inculturation of Christianity in Africa*; Spearhead 112-114 (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1990), 55-88, esp., 58.

¹⁸ Within a space of few kilometers from CIWA to the Port Harcourt International airport, one can see the advertisements of the following churches: Christ Victory Sabbath Church, Holy Ghost Power Fire Ministry, The Lord’s Chosen Charismatic Fulfillment, Christ Crucifixion Gospel Ministries, God of Elijah Ministries, Christ Fulfillment and Reconciliation Gospel Church, Mount Zion Church, The Redeemed Church of Christ to list but a few, each urging the public to come and worship with them.

prefer to attend a charismatic fellowship session rather than attend Mass on Sunday. Prayers of the Faithful are often punctuated with such phrases as “Father Lord . . . for as your word says” or “as you say in your word”.

Interest in Bible is not restricted to prayer sessions. People often punctuate their conversations and speeches with “as the Bible says” or “as it says in the Bible” or as “the word of God says” in such and such a book. Even politicians quote the Bible, especially the Old Testament, to support their actions, rightly or wrongly. Some Pentecostals use the Bible to critique certain Catholic practices like the Rosary, the sacrament of reconciliation and infant baptism. The questions, “Is it in the Bible?” or “Where is it in the Bible?” can be quite disconcerting to Catholics who know neither the traditions of the Church nor the Bible itself. They lead at times to some leaving the Church on the false grounds that the Church is acting contrary to Bible.

The lay faithful are not alone caught up in this problematic and obsession with what “the Bible says”. Some priests feel compelled to imitate the style of TV preachers and to join in the chorus, “as the Bible says”. At times they cite the Bible, with wrong chapter and verse, or verses which do not exist; for instance, “John chapter 22 verse 7”. Passages from the Old Testament may be attributed to Paul or John and vice versa. The reason for all this is that the Catholic Priest in a determination not to be left out or behind or made to feel irrelevant to his audience, or be seen to be ignorant of the Bible, simulates a acknowledge of Scripture which he does not have.¹⁹

Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out to the entire world and proclaim the good news. As a result, the Catholic Church is very keen in encouraging the preaching of the word. Since the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (the 40th anniversary of which was celebrated in 2005) and subsequent papal documents on the Bible, never tire of emphasizing the importance of proclaiming the Good News as Jesus commissioned.²⁰ The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) founded in 1968 by Paul VI seeks to promote a conciliar approach to the study of Scripture and the Catholic biblical apostolate; it has branches in almost every diocese worldwide.

This biblical apostolate is concerned primarily with how to proclaim the word effectively to people in their various languages and cultures so that they can hear and understand it as did “all the nations under heaven” at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12). The Church in Nigeria is a member of this Federation. The effectiveness and existence of this apostolate vary from diocese to diocese. The Catholic Biblical Apostolate (CBAN) a unit of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN) took up the challenge of making the *Lineamenta* of the Synod on the Word of God available and easily understood by the people. Outside the charismatic circles, perhaps, the biblical apostolate appears to make little impact on life generally; though members of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria (CCRN) appear not to be part of the Catholic Biblical Instructors Union (CBIU), the grassroots body through which CBAN works.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has laid great emphasis on making Scripture available and accessible not only to Christ’s faithful, but also to non-Christians.²¹ The apostolate of the CBF as already said is an outstanding response to this. The *Lineamenta* of the Synod on “The Word of God in the Mission of the Church”, following in the footsteps of *Dei Verbum*, stressed the need to organize reading sessions, promote *lectio divina* and train people on ways of reading the Bible.

The Church further emphasizes the importance of the Bible in the mission of the Church. Chapter III of the *Lineamenta* was devoted to this. Aspects of this mission include proclamation of the word (no.

¹⁹ A student Brother reports how he noted down about sixty-six references to the Bible in a homily. When, after Mass, he looked up those references, three quarters of them were wrong. This may be an exceptional case, but it proves the point.

²⁰ Notable among them are *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI; and severally in the works of John Paul II. The proclamation of the Year of the Word by Benedict XVI is itself evidence of the Pope’s great interest in the Bible as word of God. For a compendium of the Church’s documents on the Bible see Dennis J. Murphy MSC, ed., *The Church and the Bible: Official Documents of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2001).

²¹ See DV 24; and cf. *Lineamenta*, no. 26.

25); making it accessible to all in every age (no. 26); using it as a grace of communion among Christians (no. 27); as a light for inter-religious dialogue with Jewish people and other religions (nos. 28-30); and as a leaven in modern culture (no. 31). In this venture, the Bible with knowledge of it tends to receive the centre stage, though the need to be its living witness is by no means lacking. The conclusion of the *Lineamenta* highlights the importance of “listening to the Word of God in the life of the believer” (no. 33).

In sum, one can hardly turn in any direction in Nigeria without meeting, in one way or another, a keen interest in the word of God and for diverse reasons. On this level of interest and awareness of what the Bible says there is no problem. The observation in the *Lineamenta* (no. 26), that “despite much insistence by the Church, . . . most Christians, in effect, do not have personal contact with the Scriptures”, does not apply in the Nigerian and African contexts. The question is whether this preoccupation with God’s word actually responds to how God wants us to understand and live this word. Archbishop John Onaiyekan once aptly warned against what appears to be “bibliolatry” (worship of the Bible) rather than living by the Bible.

Evaluation

An in-depth study of the aims and objectives of the overwhelming interest in the Bible is yet to be systematically conducted. For our immediate purposes, it suffices to say that most people read and cite the Bible in order to call God to task on his promises. God promised to do such and such for his people, therefore when the individual asks God, God is bound to perform. The use of the Bible in such cases amounts to fetishism. Some believers and unbelievers actually use the Bible as a sort of talisman. What this implies is their awareness of the power of the Bible. Claiming the authority of the Bible, people have reduced God to a problem solver. We are all familiar with the phrase, “God will solve all your problems” often heard from the pulpit; whether or not the people addressed do actually have problems is immaterial. God is asked to provide good jobs, give the fruit of the womb, a life partner, break ancestral curses, liberate from ancestral spirits, and deal summarily with one’s enemies, all because the word of God says “ask and you will receive”.

While they see God as a problem solver and a “Father Christmas” and seek God’s blessings, the same people may cheat their clients; embezzle public funds; pay unjust or no wages or delayed wages to their workers (sometimes for months or years). Yet they may offer huge sums for the support of the Church; buy cars and jeeps for priests and pastors; build churches and donate or pledge fat sums in thanksgiving harvest and bazaars (even if it takes them years to redeem the pledges made). People pay tithes faithfully and attend all kinds of prayer and healing sessions, vigils, tarry nights, allegedly on the authority of God’s word. The resultant impression is a tit for tat bargain approach to God, allegedly on the authority of the Bible.

The overall emphasis in studying the Bible, both within and outside the Church, seems to be on what we human beings can do or need to do to get to know the Bible. All this is praiseworthy; but how does it square with scriptural emphasis itself on a correct attitude to God’s word? Does this concern with promoting the knowledge of the Bible/Scriptures unintentionally shift the focus from Christ to whom the Scriptures point (John 5:39) to the Bible as a be all and end all? How does the Church ensure that the promotion of the biblical apostolate does not become a thing in itself, a false security that neutralizes the fundamental challenge and call of the Christian to be another Christ, a God-word in the world?

God’s word is not a bargain or business venture (though many today seem to make the preaching of the word the fastest growing business as a solution to the prevailing joblessness in the country and continent). Paul called such people “peddlers of the word”. It is rather “something alive and active”, alive in the lives of individuals and their communities, challenging them to be God-like in all their ways. While in general people challenge God to keep the divine promises, Scripture itself lays unrelenting emphasis on the need for the hearer to accept, believe, keep, do and live by the word. Jesus has a number of injunctions

on this matter. To his disciples at the Last Supper, his parting words were, “Now that you know these things [his life among them as ‘one who serves’, graphically illustrated by his washing their feet], you will be blessed, if you do them” (John 13:17). At the end of his Sermon on the Mount, tagged the *Magna Charta* of the kingdom, he said that anyone who listens to, hears, keeps his words and acts on them is “like a sensible person who built his or her house on rock” and which nothing could destroy. But one who hears and does not act accordingly is like a foolish person who built his or her house on sand such that the least wind demolished it completely (Matt 7:24-27). It is also pointless calling him “Lord, Lord” without doing what he says (Luke 7:46-49). People, like Mary his mother (Luke 1:26-38; 42-45; 2:19), are blessed if they hear God’s word and keep it (Luke 11:27-28). A good portion of the letter to the Hebrews (chs. 3-4; 10-11) is devoted to the indispensability of *listening* to God’s living and active word and *acting* accordingly.

We may recall Jesus’ verdict on the scripture searching activities of the Scribes and Pharisees, the biblical scholars of his time: “You search [*eraunate* or pore over] the scriptures [day and night] because you think that in them you have eternal life. And indeed the scriptures speak of me. But you will not come to me to find life” (John 5:39). Jesus, not the Bible, is the ultimate Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:7). People, especially Catholics, today who get hooked on the Bible and have little or no interest in the Eucharist need to become aware of this statement of Jesus as it applies to them. He alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life. As “other Christ” (in the words of St Augustine) Christians are also called to be the way, the truth and the life; to become Eucharist by breaking the bread of their lives as food for all humanity in their daily living. They are meant to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matt 5:13, 14), as Jesus designates them.

In a year dedicated to the Word of God and against the backdrop whereby even Jesus seems to become an appendix to what the word of God says, it is imperative to awaken in people the consciousness that all said and done, Jesus is God’s word who alone reveals God absolutely and uniquely in the totality of his life from which his words and teaching flowed. John testifies that “No one has ever seen God, the only begotten God [*monogenēs theos*] who is close to the Father’s bosom has made him known” (John 1:18). The Johannine Jesus declares “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9). If as much emphasis as is laid on knowledge of the Bible were laid on imitating Jesus, if those who know, quote and teach the Bible on television committed themselves with the same zeal to imitating Jesus, God-Word incarnate, our country and world today would be a very different place, a heaven on earth rather than a “valley of tears”. The word of God in the Bible cannot truly be as alive, active and fruitful for the receiver as God intends it to be (Isa 55:10) if it does not lead the one who receives, proclaims or studies it to commit self wholeheartedly to following Jesus, thus becoming the visible presence of God, God incarnate in/by his or her entire life; a witness to Christ in deed and in truth in the whole of one’s life.

Jesus himself did not simply read the Scriptures as a kind of hobby. He did so in order to discover from the Scriptures his own identity as the Messiah (what Scripture required of him) and to summon from them the inner courage and energy to live out his mission regardless of the people’s messianic expectations and the temptation to betray his identity.

You do not ask for sacrifice and offerings,
but an open ear. [Literally: “ears you have dug for me”].
You do not ask for holocausts and victim [or sin offering].
Instead, “Here I am.
In the scroll of the book it is written of me
that I should do your will.
My God, I delight to do your will
in the depths of my heart”.²²

²² Ps 40:6-8. Hebrews 10:5-7 cites this psalm to encourage the audience to align their lives with that of Christ. The Psalm is also cited in many of Our Lord’s feasts, the latest this year (2008) being the Responsorial Psalm for Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A.

Again he says, “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work” (John 4:34). In other words, doing God’s will was what sustained him, kept him alive and gave meaning to his entire life and ministry. At the end of his ministry he concludes, “I have completed the work which you gave me to do” (John 17:4). Concretely this will was the salvation and liberation of humanity by the offering of himself once and for all on the cross (Heb 10:10, 12, 14).

The point is clear. True knowledge of God’s word leads one in turn to seek to do God’s will in the entirety of one’s life. The purpose of this undertaking is not primarily to please God but because one’s identity as God’s child and God-word (one spoken into being by God), requires this. Even so did Jesus’ identity as God-Word incarnate and Messiah make it imperative for him to know and do to the end (*eis telos*, John 13:1-2); to accept the eschatological imperative (*dei*) that he must be “lifted up” (John 3:14) to accomplish absolutely and most perfectly what God’s word of supreme and utmost love required of him for the good and rebirth of humanity (cf. John 10:10-11, 14-18).

Ways Forward

The above reflection on the dynamics of the living and active nature of God’s word challenges us to chart ways forward so that the explosive interest in God’s word witnessed on all fronts in our times may bear fruit that will endure. Such fruit can only be based on what God, whose inspired word the Bible is, tells us in this Bible and requires of us. In what follows we highlight a few steps we can take to redirect the interest in the Bible towards God so that God’s word in our lives and communities can be rooted in the truth which alone can set us free from any slavish or inordinate attachment to “the word of God” (cf. John 8:31-36).

Emphasis on the human being as God’s word

The first evidence of Scripture, as we saw at the beginning, is that the human being himself or herself is an expression of God’s word. God said, “Let us make humanity in our own image and likeness” (Gen 1:26-27). The Pauline tradition underscores that human beings are “God’s work of art” (Eph 2:10); “God’s garden, building and tilling” (1 Cor 3:9). This word of God, the human being, is also alive and active as long as life lasts. Each living and active believer, therefore, to be true to own identity needs to commit self to living and acting in everyway as God’s image and likeness and child, so that through such action, the person, like Jesus, God-Word incarnate, may give glory to God and in turn be glorified by God (John 17:1-3). This observation recalls the emphasis of the Second Vatican Council reiterated by John Paul II in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* and severally afterwards, that the “the human being is the route which the Church needs to travel” in the work of evangelization and mission. The first challenge therefore is to help people to realize that God lives, acts and speaks in them as God did in Jesus (cf. John 14:9-12) and that they have a personal responsibility not to divorce God from their lives.²³

In practice, this awareness challenges us to watch how we use words. For as said at the beginning, our words are not neutral; we image God by the ability to speak. Quite often our words about others, our country and even ourselves are negative. This is shown in such phrases as “This is Nigeria; this is Africa; what more can you expect?” The same applies in our attitude to one another, to things Nigerian and African and to our rulers. Children learn or are socialized into this negative and abusive language from home, even before they have any sense of right and wrong. Can we move from this death-dealing type of language into God language that is creative and life-giving? God’s words are spirit and life; our words to one another and about one another and the whole of life should also be spirit and life.

²³ One can conclude that when Jesus here says that the believer “will do even greater things” than himself, he is generously sharing with believers, whom after the resurrection he calls his siblings (brothers and sisters, John 20:17; Matt 28:10), the grace and privilege of experiencing God living and acting in them (John 14:23-24).

Christians are anointed and sent like/with Jesus to be Good News

One way of helping our people into Christian maturity is to make them aware that as God's children in deed and in truth, they too have been anointed like and with Jesus to proclaim and to be God's good news to the whole of humanity, beginning from their homes and places of work as springboard for preaching to others. Jesus asked the disciples to begin the proclamation in Jerusalem and Judea, where they were located before moving to the ends of the earth (Acts 2:8). Facing this challenge will move our people from the current over dependency syndrome on pastors and TV preachers to becoming active participants in the proclamation of the gospel.

We cannot proclaim the gospel effectively unless we have first experienced its transforming power in our lives. Since the object of such proclamation will be to invite people to come and experience our fellowship or communion with the Trinity. The author of 1 John declares that what they proclaim to the people is what they have seen with their eyes, heard with their ears and touched, felt with their hands. They proclaim this so that the hearers may in turn share in their communion fellowship with the Trinity (1 John 1:1-4). Often the ultimate end of proclaiming the gospel, namely, the intimate communion of all believers among themselves because they are members of Christ's body (1 Cor 12:12-13, 27) and one person in Christ (Gal 4:23-28), is not emphasized. Yet this is the ultimate goal of Jesus' mission.²⁴ This poses a challenge to both evangelizers and evangelized, for as Paul VI rightly says, the faith is not fully planted in any country, church or among a people unless they themselves become evangelizers as a result of having received the gospel.²⁵ Mary did this in her visit to Elizabeth after the annunciation (Luke 1:39-56).

Genuine life is knowing God and Jesus

Jesus declared that eternal life lies not in knowing the Bible, but in knowing God and Jesus Christ whom God has sent (John 17:3). Knowledge here, as in Semitic thought, is not intellectual knowledge but experience and intimate communion with what or who one knows. Scripture, especially the gospels, constitutes a unique way of knowing God and Jesus; but knowledge of Scripture, however active, is not and cannot replace true and full knowledge of God as revealed by Jesus in the totality of his life. John declares that what Jesus did far surpasses what can be encapsulated in the book, yet the book has enough information to inspire life-giving faith in him (John 20:30-31). Scripture, in the words of Paul, acts like a tutor (or disciplinarian) or guardian leading us to Christ (referring to knowledge and discipleship of the Torah as opposed to knowledge and discipleship of Jesus). Jesus himself is "the substance" (Gal 3:23-4:1).

Christians and especially Catholics need to be helped and enlightened to know that true knowledge of the Bible must lead them to Jesus. To this end, emphasis needs to be laid on the Eucharist and the sacrifice of the Mass as unparalleled gift which Jesus gives us, if we want to have eternal life, and which also invites us to become Eucharist for others in our daily living. John Paul II reiterated this in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. The core meaning of the Eucharist is utmost love. Benedict XVI, accordingly, underscores this in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. This love is based on hope, hence his most recent encyclical *Spe Salvi*.²⁶ The traditional three theological virtues remain faith, hope and love, and the greatest of them is love (1 Cor 13:13), because love makes us like God and is the one virtue that can do no wrong to the neighbour (Rom 13:8-10).

Concerted effort needs to be made to instruct the people about the value and worth of the Eucharist and of the sacrifice of the Mass. Here, unlike in natural human sacrifices, it is God himself offering,

²⁴ See, for instance, John 11:52; 12:32; 2 Cor 5:16-21; Col 1:15-20; to cite but a few passages.

²⁵ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Evangelisation in the Modern World* (8 December 1975), especially nos. 6-16.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005); Benedict XVI, "Deus Caritas Est" AAS (December 2006) 217-252; idem, *Spe Salvi* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007).

sacrificing the divine self for us in the person of Jesus, in order to draw us closer to Goself.²⁷ No human made prayer, however scripturally based, can compare with or replace the sacrifice of the Mass. Our people still have great value for sacrifice. God has given us the perfect sacrifice free of charge, or better still, at God's own expense. If we want to offer a sacrifice truly pleasing to God, we cannot think of another that surpasses the one which God himself has given to us. Let us accept it with gratitude and joy and enter into it with our entire lives all day long, making them "a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God".

A Conclusion

The reflection has highlighted the dynamic character of God's word from God's perspective and from the human perspective, since human beings, made in God's image and likeness share with God the power of word to communicate and require a response. Word is primarily a medium of communication. What counts is what it communicates and the response it requires. Word is therefore not an end in itself. The same should apply in our understanding of the Bible as God's inspired word. Jesus, God-Word Incarnate, holds for us the fullest and truest (in the sense of real) key for understanding the Bible. Therefore no study of the Bible should treat him and his teachings as an appendix.

More could be said and needs to be said on the topic of this presentation. The last section in particular on the word of God in our Nigerian/African context requires a more serious, systematic and coordinated reflection and action than could be undertaken within the constraints of this presentation. My humble view based on my keen observation of the situation for some time now and attentive listening to the Scriptures with fresh eyes, is that all of us need primary evangelization. By this I do not mean that we have not yet heard about God's word. By "we" also, I do not mean only Nigerians and Africans. I mean all Christians worldwide.

We need, in the words of John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*,²⁸ to launch into the deep at Jesus' command, and discover, perhaps for the first time, the abundant wealth which God's word holds for us, but which in the past two thousand years we did not really or fully grasp because of the paradigms we used in reading the Bible and the theological frameworks employed. The Lineamenta of the Synod on the Word (no. 26) mentions the "many theological and methodological uncertainties" which some Christians (scholars, understood) have "in communicating their content".²⁹ Primary evangelization is, therefore, necessary for all. It requires that we have the humility to allow God's Spirit to lead us to "the complete truth" concerning the great deeds of God narrated in the Bible and taught and embodied in Jesus (John 15:12-13; 14:25-26).

The harvest is indeed great, especially given the very keen interest in the Bible in our country and continent. The labourers may be few, but the Lord of the harvest knows how to send labourers into the harvest. May we be ready and willing labourers, even if, as an Association, we feel hired at the eleventh hour (compared to other older biblical associations) to work in the Lord's vineyard or be his witnesses to our people. Let us individually and together strive to become more authentic living witnesses to and bearers of God's word, as our Blessed Mother was. Let us be accountable for the scripture formation we have received and which enables us to discern not only "what" the word of God says but also most importantly

²⁷ I have developed this point in an earlier work in relation to sacrifice in Hebrews, "Hebrews: Sacrifice in an African Perspective", in *Global Bible Commentary*, edited by Daniel Patte, Teresa Okure et alii (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004) 535-538.

²⁸ See note 5 above.

²⁹ The document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) gives a comprehensive evaluative review of contemporary methodologies. I have also done an extensive evaluation of such methods and their negative, at times devastating effects on both the meaning of God's inspired word and on the faith of the non expert readers and scholars themselves in T. Okure, "'I will open my mouth in parables' (Matt 13:35): A Case for a Gospel-Based Biblical Hermeneutics", *NTS* 46 (2000)445-463.

“how” it means. Let us do what it requires of us all so that it may truly be alive and active in our times and nation.