

God's Word, A Javelin

An Essay Contending for the Javelin like Nature of the Word of God

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Introduction: God's Word, A Javelin

The chief god in Scandinavian mythology, Odin, carried a javelin called Gungnir. This javelin was no ordinary javelin, for it was created by a group of dwarves known as the Sons of Ivaldi. It was fashioned from the holy wood of Yggdrasil, a tree centered in the cosmos that reached to the heavens. The javelin has been defined as being so well composed that it could hit any mark, regardless of the ability and strength of the person throwing it. It always found its aim, for it moved perpetually forward.¹

The idea of the javelin Gungnir possessing power within itself, regardless of the person throwing it, is a most commanding image. Furthermore, the idea of a javelin having penetrating power, a power integrally possessed within the javelin itself, also elicits us to ponder its characteristics. Consider with me the implications of this mythological weapon, for it indeed was a supreme weapon. A mere mortal could pick it up, throw it at a target, and the javelin itself is effective to do its job of hitting the mark and inflicting a deadly blow. Furthermore, as a javelin, Gungnir was meant to be aimed, Gungnir was meant to penetrate and deliver. Is this not the same with the Word of God?

I certainly don't mean to diminish the Word of God by comparing it to Scandinavian mythology, but I do believe and contend that this metaphor of a javelin, as described so well in the Scandinavian mythology, is most fitting for the Word of God.

There is resistance to this metaphor though. From approximately 10 years of pastoral experience, I have observed this resistance from individuals inside and outside of the church. Though I am not completely sure, this resistance may be due to a number of factors such as:

¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda* (New York, NY: Everyman's Library, 1995), 96-97.

resistance to being subservient to the Word; the desire to place pious fellowship and church tranquility above an invading Word; the aspiration to maintain a cultural narrative of love and tolerance by isolating an interrogating Word; or simply the need to eliminate the incursion of the Word due to the love of darkness more than the love of light.

For the sake of this essay though, I have decided to explore three particular areas or spheres, if you will, where I have observed resistance to the javelin metaphor. First, the Word as a javelin is resisted when individuals assert that the metaphor of a javelin is too aggressive or simply too extreme of an analogy for God's Word. Second, the javelin metaphor is resisted when individuals assert that the Word, as a javelin, is unnecessary for the human condition—that the human condition does not demand a penetrating and performative Word. Third, the javelin nature of the Word is resisted practically speaking when pastors and ecclesiastical leadership attempt to dull the javelin character of the Word in order to diminish potential blowback from congregations and others.

Despite the resistance of applying the javelin metaphor to the Word, it is what it is. Otherwise stated, I will contend in the following paragraphs that this metaphor of a javelin is exactly what the Word is and does. Furthermore, I will claim in the following paragraphs that the Word as a javelin is exactly what is needed by all. Finally, I will vie that any attempts to dull or lessen the javelin nature of the Word, are not a mere diminishing of a particular quality of the Word, but an actual changing of the Word into something that it is not, a different word altogether. Consequently, any attempts to resist the javelin nature of the Word are actually a resistance to the Word itself.

Is The Javelin Metaphor Too Extreme and Too Aggressive?

Some in the interest of maintaining pious tranquil sentiments about the Word of God argue that the metaphor of a javelin is too extreme or too aggressive; however, is it? I believe that it is not. In the Old Testament the word תורה (i.e., Torah) is used for God's Word, especially referring to the whole of the Pentateuch. With that said, "The noun torah comes from verb, yarah, that means to throw something, a javelin, say, so that it hits its mark. The word that hits its mark is torah."² Within the New Testament the penetrating nature of the Word is also shown in Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Take special note the words 'active, sharp, piercing' in Hebrews 4:12. Indeed, the Word "breaks through and wounds. It takes away every ground of trust and ascribes redemption solely to the blood of Christ; it pricks and wounds the soul. This is a health-bestowing wound, for these weapons kill in order to make alive."³ What this means is that God's Word has aim. "God's word is not a reference book in a library that we pull off the shelf when we want information. There is nothing inert or bookish in these words. God's words, creating and saving words every one, hit us where we live. . . . These words get inside us and work their meaning in us."⁴

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms As Tools For Prayer* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1991), 25.

³ Martin Luther, *Luther's works, vol. 12: Selected Psalms* eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 225.

⁴ Peterson, *Answering God*, 25.

Words have power. Words are neither mere vacuous puffs of wind nor powerless upon the mind and soul as some Platonists teach, but rather they “—exercise a wholesome power over our souls, not to control and coerce but to form and to teach, to bring our lives to the point where we may speak the truth and thereby engage in the work of thought. And if our souls are shaped by words, then words can give adequate expression to what is in them. Indeed, words are just the thing we need to be human, creatures made in the image of God who speaks the truth.”⁵ Keep in mind that what makes God’s Word different from other words is that God’s Word is inspired, whereas other words are not divinely inspired. “The Holy Spirit wills to be present with his power in the Word and to work through it.”⁶ “The Holy Spirit wills to be efficacious and to give strength, power, and ability through the Word.”⁷ Yes, the proclamation of the Word and the hearing of the Word “would be in vain, and no conversion would result from these efforts, if the power and action of the Holy Spirit were not added to them. For the Spirit enlightens and converts hearts through the Word.”⁸ Otherwise stated, due to inspiration, God’s Word possesses divine properties and divine attributes.⁹ “This divine power does not operate outside or alongside the Word, but through the Word and therefore

⁵ Phillip Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine’s Thought* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), xii.

⁶ The Formula of Concord, Article XI, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 653.

⁷ *Ibid*, 645.

⁸ The Formula of Concord, Article II, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 554.

⁹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics: Volume I* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 307.

inheres in the Word.”¹⁰ Consequently, the efficacy of God’s Word is its ability to affect man in ways that exceed human power, namely repentance and faith.¹¹ Non-Biblical words do not have the power to pierce a person inwardly in order to affect these changes, for they are not inspired words.

The metaphors of a javelin, sword, and a hammer are all very appropriate for the Word of God.¹² These metaphors capture this living, active, aiming, delivering, penetrating, and effectual nature of the Word. The Word is not a mere motionless walking stick that is captive to the will of man. Rather it is the “nature of Scripture to be ‘political,’ that is, formative. It is the nature of Scripture to want power over our lives.”¹³ Yes indeed, God tears us down that He might heal us; He strikes us down so that He will bind us; He takes us to hell to bring us to heaven; and He kills to bring life. That said, God does not merely kill for the sake of killing, His killing is not separate from His bringing to life. God kills ‘so that’ he may bring to life; He strikes down ‘so that’ he can bind up. Hence, He acts upon mankind through His divine effectual Word creating repentance and faith; it is a motif of death and resurrection.¹⁴

The metaphor of a javelin is most suitable for the Word of God.

¹⁰Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics: Volume I*, 317.

¹¹ Ibid, 315-316.

¹² Besides the linguistic nature of the word ‘torah’ and Hebrews 4:12, take note of Jeremiah 23:29 where the Word is compared to a fire or a hammer.

¹³ William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 113.

¹⁴ See: Hosea 6:1; 2 Corinthians 3:6; 1 Samuel 2:6-7; and Martin Luther’s Lectures on Genesis 45:5 (AE 8).

Is A Javelin Really Necessary?

While one may accept the javelin nature of the Word in principle, is it indeed necessary? Does the human condition demand a piercing and performative Word? Otherwise stated, it could be reasoned that the javelin nature of the Word may be necessary for those who are 'outside' of the church, but does the church need such a supposedly violent word?

In Genesis chapter three Eve, who I often call the first enthusiast, departs from the quintessential epistemological source, God's Word, and eats the forbidden fruit. She believed Satan contrary to God's Word. This was the Devil's plan, to distance her from the Word. Adam, being the head of the family, should have trusted God's Word too, put Eve over his shoulder, brought her to God, confessed her sin, and said, "Now take my life." However, Adam took the fruit as well, disobeying and distancing himself from God's Word. Therefore, "since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God."¹⁵ Mankind, who was created in the image of God, now has an image that, "is not lost, but turned to its opposite."¹⁶ Otherwise stated, because of the fall, "sinners have further diminished their ability to comprehend who God is

¹⁵ The Augsburg Confession, Article II, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 37-38.

¹⁶ Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 49.

and what his disposition toward his human creatures is.”¹⁷—Mankind’s nature is weak, his view of truth is tainted, his reason warped, his worldview blurred; mankind loves carnal things because man is bound in sin and the deception of the evil one. Mankind is bound to believing a counterfeit word.—Therefore, as already expressed, the; “words of Scripture are not spoken merely in order to elicit agreement of noble feelings among the hearers, but rather to form, reform, the hearers.”¹⁸—Because of mankind’s need for the Word, after the fall, God did not abandon His creation but rather; “entered into conversation with his human creature immediately after they had broken off their relationship with him, and God has continued to make contact with fallen sinners in order to reveal himself to them as well.”¹⁹ God speaks to His creation to guide them back to heed Him. God speaks so that His creation can fill in the gaps within their incomplete narratives. God speaks so that His creation can meet and define themselves within the context of this world.²⁰—Simply put, “the Word of God invades the world of sinners;”²¹ because “we are unfinished creatures requiring complex and extensive assistance in every part of our being, and language is the means for getting it.”²² Indeed “the Bible is not content to leave modern people as they are. It wants to convert and change.”²³ The Word

¹⁷ Robert Kolb and Charles Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 144.

¹⁸ Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*, 113.

¹⁹ ~~Robert~~ Kolb and ~~Charles~~ Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*, 144.

²⁰ Ibid, 147.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Peterson, *Answering God*, 35.

'must' invade; it must continually function as the only source, rule, and norm of the church's faith and practice, for apart from it the church and the world are left in despair with counterfeit Words and can do nothing.²⁴ "The Holy Spirit must always work in us through the Word, granting us daily forgiveness."²⁵ It is undeniably needed.

Can A Javelin Be Dulled And Remain A Javelin?

As already indicated, the metaphor of a javelin is a most fitting description for the Word. Furthermore, as already stated, this living, active, aiming, delivering, penetrating, effectual, and invading Word is also needed for a fallen creation. However, not everyone sees the Word of God as gift. People will often "see God's words not as javelins penetrating their lives with truth, but as chains that restrict their freedom. They put their minds together to rid themselves of this word so that their words can rule."²⁶ Otherwise stated, "God's saving and life-restoring Word causes those whose minds are trying to master life on their own terms to stumble.—People are accustomed to controlling their lives and their environments by learning through signs and empirical testing or through logical and rational analysis.—Such people are offended by having to learn about the most important aspects of life, God, and their relationship to him just by simply listening and receiving God's gifts."²⁷ As a result of this resistance, pastors and parishioners tragically attempt to dull the javelin nature of the Word in order to diminish

²³ William H. Willomon, *Shaped by the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 63.

²⁴ See John 15:1-ff.

²⁵ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism, The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 438.

²⁶ Peterson, *Answering God*, 28.

²⁷ Robert Kolb and Charles Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*, 146.

potential blowback. Fear of persecution, the lure to place harmonious fellowship above truth, the yearning not to upset numerical church growth, and the narrative of tolerance will all encroach, tempting the messenger to dull the javelin in order to eliminate and/or reduce confrontation. Consequently, this does eliminate the conflict, but the Word is then inadvertently changed to something completely different. Take for instance the following parable,

On the Island of Gymp existed a group of people who had infected legs. This infection caused them to limp and led to early death. One day an enigmatic person came to the Island of Gymp bearing a mystical chest. Within the chest were an infinite number of golden javelins. The enigmatic person gave the chest to one of the island's inhabitants commissioning him to be the island's 'javelin thrower.' The javelin thrower was given the calling to continually throw the javelins at individuals' legs in order to deliver a cure. Painfully the javelins stabbed the infected legs, destroyed the infection, and delivered healing; the javelins were certainly effective. The javelins healed. The javelins sustained. Limps were no longer. However, resistance to the javelins grew. A growing group of individuals began a revolt by immediately taking the javelins out of their legs when struck. "The javelins are painful!" they said. Furthermore, they grew tired of being dependent on the javelins. "We don't need to javelins all the time; it wasn't that bad when we limped!" they said. Thus, in anger they built shields to defend themselves from the javelins, the very thing that they needed. After much resistance and conflict, a group of peacekeepers on the island approached the javelin thrower and pleaded with him to end the conflict. Apparently the peacemaking group had garnered a compromise from the javelin resistance group. If the javelin thrower would remove the sharp blade from the javelin, the resistance would receive the javelins and even use them as walking sticks. "This is wonderful!" rejoiced the javelin thrower. This peace agreement would end the conflict, the resistance would receive the javelins, and the javelin thrower could continue in his vocation as a distributor of mystical golden javelins. Thus, the javelin thrower removed the blades and gave the neutered javelins out to people across the vast terrain of the Island of Gymp. People happily received them and daily used them as walking sticks. All was well until one day when the javelin thrower looked out over the inhabitants of Gymp Island and painfully realized that the distributed javelins were no longer golden javelins, but wooden walking sticks; and worst of all, everyone was limping.

The meaning of the parable is fairly obvious; it makes a great deal of difference how pastors and the church speaks. Congregations are "being shaped, for good or ill, through the words we use in our worship and work together. It is therefore a matter of life or death for the

congregation when we substitute other language—the talk of psychology, the speech of sociology, economics, or good old American consumerism—for the speech of Israel and church.”²⁸ Therefore, the words that are used in the church matter. Keep in mind that Biblical Words don’t merely remind but reveal; they shape and form, they gift repentance and faith. Therefore, when Biblical Words are exchanged for non-Biblical words or if the semantics and syntax of Biblical words are tampered with, one is no longer purporting Biblical words but an alternative word.²⁹ Otherwise stated, by dulling the javelin to eliminate hostility, the javelin ceases to be a javelin. It is changed to a mere walking stick. Javelins are not walking sticks; walking sticks are not javelins. A neutered javelin is no longer a javelin either. Words have meaning; different words have different meanings. These different non-Biblical words do shape and form; however, as previously stated, they are powerless in affecting man in ways that exceed human power, for they are not inspired. Unfortunately, what can happen is that these neutered -Words are hijacked and becomes subservient to the old Adam; this neutered-Word becomes indebted to mankind’s will.³⁰

In order to let mankind’s words rule, the Word of God must be suppressed and controlled. In order to eliminate all possibilities of pushback, the Word of God must be tamed. However, the only way to tame God’s Word is to substitute other language for God’s Word altogether. The reason being, the Word ‘cannot’ be dulled for it is always active, aiming,

²⁸ Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible*, 79.

²⁹ Note: There is a difference between ‘translating words’ and ‘exchanging words.’ With translating, missionaries take the original Hebrew and Greek testaments and translate these words into a particular language of the people group that they have encountered. For the missionary, the key of translating is accuracy and textual faithfulness. Whereas, the intention of exchanging Biblical words with different words altogether is most often to avoid and eliminate negative reactions.

³⁰ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 158-159.

delivering, penetrating, and effectual. Can one truly tame a Lion? Thus, if a person wants to be faithful to the Word, he must know that the Word will often cause offense. This means that “we should not be surprised that it [the Word] continues to offend. In fact, we preachers ought to be troubled when our handling of the Bible never offends!”³¹ In summary, by dulling the javelin one will eliminate conflict, but one will inadvertently change the javelin into something altogether different. However, by letting the Word be what it actually is, a javelin, it will penetrate, do its work upon the hearer, resulting in some people delighting and others plotting.³²

Conclusion: A Word To Pastors And Parishioners

Pastors, you have the great privilege of proclaiming and teaching the Word of God. The Word of God has been given to you to proclaim, not your experience and not the wisdom of the world. Like your congregations, you stand underneath the scriptures and are formed by the Word. Therefore, as you study and proclaim the Scriptures, these javelin truths will indeed penetrate ears, hearts, worldviews and epistemological systems of both you and the congregation. The Scriptures will challenge, comfort, convert, form, shape, and sustain your congregation because God is actually present and exercising power in His Word in oral, written, and sacramental forms.³³ Stand firm! Do not apologize for the javelin. Stand firm! Do not dull

³¹ Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible*, 63.

³² See Psalm 1 and Psalm 2.

³³ T.R. Halvorson (email message to author, July 27, 2012) says, “Many people say that it does little good to quote the Bible to people who do not already accept the epistemology of revelation. If our doctrine of the Word were merely Fundamentalist or Reformed, we could agree. But in Lutheran theology, the Word is not merely authoritative and inerrant. The Word is living and active. The Word not only is something. The Word does something. It persuades those whom the Holy Spirit converts even though the converted never held either explicitly or

the javelin. Stand firm! Do not substitute the Word of God with other language. Stand firm alongside your congregation as the Word of God kills, gives life, converts, reforms, shapes, sustains, and sanctifies. Stand firm and proclaim the Word in season and out of season.³⁴

Parishioners, you come to worship to be ever reformed by the Word. Do not fall into the temptation of gathering together for just social or fellowship reasons. Without the Word the church is no different than a common rotary club. It has even been asserted that a church untested by the Word of God “can be demonic.”³⁵ This is not who you are! You are a people of the Word, people shaped by the Word. Therefore, know this, when you go to church do not be surprised or even offended when the Word of God comes at you like a javelin, penetrating your ears, hearts, lives, and narratives. Parishioners, expect an invasion of the Word, for this is the nature of the Word and this is good.³⁶ We need to be gifted repentance and faith daily!

Thank God that His Word is not simply ‘like’ a javelin, but rather it is a javelin and a noble javelin indeed. It breaks through and wounds the soul; a health-bestowing wound. It

implicitly to the epistemology of revelation before, because the Holy Spirit and the Word have the power to effect either or both implicit or explicit epistemological change in the hearer, causing them to, seemingly simultaneously, convert to the Word and to Christ, to the revelation and the Person, and that happens because of the Word being like a sacrament (or the sacraments being like the Word) does something.”

³⁴ See 2 Timothy 4:1-5

³⁵ Willimon, *Shaped By The Bible*, 85.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 63.

“takes away every ground of trust and ascribes redemption solely to the blood of Christ.”³⁷ This is praiseworthy, for it truly kills in order to make alive.³⁸

³⁷ Luther, *Luther's works, vol. 12: Selected Psalms* eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, 225.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

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