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# In the Beginning Was the Word

LANGUAGE—A GOD-CENTERED  
APPROACH

VERN SHERIDAN POYTHRESS

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# The Importance of Language

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.

—Psalm 33:6

**L**anguage is wonderful and mysterious. It is so because it is a gift of God to us. It reflects and reveals him.

How does language reflect God? According to the Bible, God himself can speak, and does speak. We are made like him, and that is why we can speak. When we use language, we rely on resources and powers that find their origin in God. In fact, as we shall see, language reflects God in his Trinitarian character. We can appreciate language more deeply, and use it more wisely, if we come to know God and understand the relation of God to the language we use.

Because I am a follower of Christ, I trust in the Bible as the word of God.<sup>1</sup> The Bible is a foundational resource for my thinking about language. From time to time we will look briefly at other views of language. But my primary purpose is helping people increase their appreciation for language, using the Bible for guidance. If you as a reader are not yet convinced about the Bible, I would still invite you to think with me about language. The actual character of language does, I believe, confirm what the Bible says.

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1. Interested readers may consult many works that show at length that the Bible is the word of God. See, among others, Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (reprint; Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967); D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983). It is an important issue, so important that it deserves much more space than we could take here.

## The Central Role of Language

Language has a central role in human living. We spend a lot of our time talking and listening. Education constantly uses language. Television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet use language. Friendships are cemented and maintained through language.<sup>2</sup> All these are sources of meaning in our lives.

Some tasks, such as washing dishes, do not demand using language. But even they gain significance from what we say and think about them. We wash dishes because through language we have learned about bacteria, sickness, and how washing helps protect health. And washing dishes can be more pleasant if we are talking with a friend while doing it.

We could go on. Many of the most significant and precious moments in life gain significance through language. So examining language itself could contribute significantly to reorienting our lives. That is why we are going to take a long look at language and its meaning.

## The Importance of Language in the Bible

The Bible confirms the importance of language. It says that in the beginning God created the world using language: “And God *said*, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3).<sup>3</sup>

The first recorded interaction between God and man involved God *speaking in language* concerning man’s task:

And God blessed them. And God *said* to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28).

Adam and Eve fell into sin through the serpent’s use of language to tempt them: the serpent *said*, “You will not surely die” (Gen. 3:4). Shortly afterward, God gave hope to Adam and Eve through a promise of redemption, and the promise was expressed in language:

The LORD God *said* to the serpent, . . .

2. “Without the signposts of speech, the social beehive would disintegrate immediately” (Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, *Speech and Reality* [Norwich, VT: Argo, 1970], 16).

3. Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

“I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:14–15).

One of the principal aspects of Jesus’ earthly ministry was teaching and proclaiming a message.<sup>4</sup> He used language; he had much to say. And he made plain the importance of his teaching:

“Everyone then who hears these *words of mine* [Jesus’ words] and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these *words of mine* and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it” (Matt. 7:24–27).

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead by issuing a verbal command: “Lazarus, come out” (John 11:43). Jesus’ words have power. The future resurrection of the body will take place through the power of Jesus’ words: “. . . for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his [Jesus’] *voice* and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28–29).<sup>5</sup>

At the last judgment people will be judged according to their *words*:

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless *word* they speak, for by your *words* you will be justified, and by your *words* you will be condemned (Matt. 12:36–37).

And how can we escape condemnation? The answer to condemnation is found in the gospel, the good news concerning what Christ has done to save us. That good news is a *verbal message*. Through this *message*, given in *language*, people come to believe in Christ and to receive God’s salvation:

For I am not ashamed of the *gospel*, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:16–17).

4. Mark 1:38–39: “And he said to them, ‘Let us go on to the next towns, that I may *preach* there also, for that is *why* I came out.’ And he went throughout all Galilee, *preaching* in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

5. Note also the illustration of the power of the prophetic word when Ezekiel is told to prophesy and in response dead bones come to life (Ezek. 37:4–10).

But what does it *say*? “The *word* is near you, in your *mouth* and in your *heart*” (that is, the *word* of faith that we *proclaim*); because, if you *confess* with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom. 10:8–9).

How then will they *call* on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never *heard*? And how are they to *hear* without someone *preaching*? And how are they to *preach* unless they are sent? As it is *written*, “How beautiful are the feet of those who *preach* the *good news*!” But they have not all obeyed the *gospel*. For Isaiah *says*, “Lord, who has believed what he has *heard* from us?” So faith comes from *hearing*, and *hearing* through the *word* of Christ (Rom. 10:14–17).

Words, then, have a central role, according to the Bible. And of course the Bible itself is composed of words.

We may note still one more role of language. Jesus Christ himself has a close relation to language. The Gospel of John calls Christ “the Word,” and begins by speaking of his eternal existence with God:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made (John 1:1–3).

These verses in John allude to the opening chapter in Genesis, when God created the universe by speaking. So the “Word” in John 1:1, that is, Christ before his incarnation, was the source of the speech of God in Genesis. Christ is thus the origin of language itself. Moreover, Christ says concerning himself, “I am the way, and *the truth*, and the life” (John 14:6). He identifies himself with “the truth,” showing a connection with truth in language. And he says that God’s word is *truth* and the source of holiness for disciples:

Sanctify them in the *truth*; your *word* is *truth*. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in *truth* (John 17:17–19).

God himself is true: “Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God *is true*” (John 3:33).

### **Language in Our Conduct**

Language, then, has a significant role in God’s relation to human beings from creation onward. Appreciating language properly can contribute to our well-being in relation to God.

Language affects not only the big issues concerning who God is, and how to be reconciled to him, but the smaller issues of how to conduct our lives. The book of Proverbs contains any number of illustrations of the importance of language in our conduct:

The *lips* of the righteous know what is acceptable,  
but the *mouth* of the wicked, what is perverse (Prov. 10:32).

There is one whose rash *words* are like sword thrusts,  
but the *tongue* of the wise brings healing (Prov. 12:18).

A wise son *hears* his father's *instruction*,  
but a *scoffer* does not *listen* to *rebuke* (Prov. 13:1).

Whoever guards his *mouth* preserves his life;  
he who opens wide his *lips* comes to ruin (Prov. 13:3).

By *insolence* comes nothing but strife,  
but with those who *take advice* is wisdom (Prov. 13:10).

Poverty and disgrace come to him who ignores *instruction*,  
but whoever *heeds reproof* is honored (Prov. 13:18).

By the *mouth* of a fool comes a rod for his back,  
but the *lips* of the wise will preserve them (Prov. 14:3).

Leave the presence of a fool,  
for there you do not meet *words* of knowledge (Prov. 14:7).

In all toil there is profit,  
but mere *talk* tends only to poverty (Prov. 14:23).

A *truthful witness* saves lives,  
but one who *breathes out lies* is deceitful (Prov. 14:25).

A soft *answer* turns away wrath,  
but a harsh *word* stirs up anger (Prov. 15:1).

Which of us would not benefit from greater wisdom in how to speak and how to listen?



P A R T 1



God's Involvement  
with Language



## Language and the Trinity

“I do as the Father has commanded me.”

—John 14:31

Language has a close relation to the Trinitarian character of God. In fact, the Trinitarian character of God is the deepest starting point for understanding language. So we need to look at what the Bible teaches about God in his Trinitarian character.

### The Trinity

The Bible teaches that God is one God, and that he exists in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I will not undertake to defend orthodox Trinitarian doctrine in detail, because this has already been done many times.<sup>1</sup> Let me mention briefly only a small number of evidences.

In addressing the polytheism of surrounding nations, the Old Testament makes it clear that there is only one true God, the God of Israel, who is the only Creator (Genesis 1; see Deut. 6:4; 32:39; Isa. 40:18–28). The New Testament introduces further revelation about the distinction of persons in God, but it everywhere presupposes the unity of one God, as revealed in the Old Testament. The New Testament does not repudiate but reinforces the Old Testament. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is *one*” (Mark 12:29). “You believe that God is *one*; you do well” (James 2:19).

1. For a recent discussion, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 619–735.

Second, in the New Testament the deity of Christ the Son of God is dramatically affirmed by applying to him Old Testament verses that use the tetragrammaton, the sacred name of God: “Everyone who calls on the name of the *Lord* will be saved” (Rom. 10:13; from Joel 2:32, which has the tetragrammaton).<sup>2</sup> We also find explicit affirmations that Jesus is God in John 1:1 (“... and the Word was God”) and John 20:28. The Holy Spirit is God, according to Acts 5:3–4.<sup>3</sup> The distinction between the persons is regularly evident in John, when it expresses the relation of two persons as a Father-and-Son relation, and when the Spirit is described as *another* Helper, indicating that he is distinct from the Son (John 14:16).

### God Speaks to Himself

The New Testament indicates that the persons of the Trinity speak to one another. This speaking on the part of God is significant for our thinking about language. Not only is God a member of a language community that includes human beings, but the persons of the Trinity function as members of a language community among themselves. Language does not have as its sole purpose human-human communication, or even divine-human communication, but also divine-divine communication. Approaches that conceive of language *only* with reference to human beings are accordingly reductionistic.

What is the evidence for divine-divine communication? First consider John 16:13–15:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever *he hears* he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

The principal role of the Holy Spirit in these verses is to speak to the disciples of Christ. But we need to notice the basis for that speaking: “Whatever *he hears* he will speak.” The Spirit is first a hearer. And whom does he hear? The subsequent explanation brings in both the Father and the Son. The Spirit hears the Father, and hears about “what is mine,” that is, what is the Son’s. Conceivably the Son as

2. The tetragrammaton is *YHWH* (Hebrew יהוה, “Jehovah”), often translated in Greek as *kurios*, “Lord”).

3. Acts 5:3–4 indicates that to lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God: “But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the *Holy Spirit* and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to *God*.’”

well as the Father is speaking to the Spirit. But in any case we have divine-divine communication between at least two persons of the Trinity.

Consider next John 17. In John 17 we have a long discourse where the Son speaks to the Father. This discourse is often called the “high priestly prayer,” because Jesus is interceding on behalf of the disciples. The label “prayer” invites us to think of this passage in connection with Jesus’ human nature. As high priest he shares our humanity, and so is able to represent us (Heb. 2:10–18; 4:15). Doubtless this is one aspect of what is going on in John 17. Some translations even use the word “pray” when they translate the Greek word that has the general meaning “ask” (17:9, 20). But Christ as a whole *person* is communing with the Father. The words we have in John 17 show us what he asks, not only with respect to his *human* nature but with respect to his *divine* nature as well. Consider, for example, that he talks about “the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5). The word “I” in that verse must include the divine nature of Christ, because the “glory that I had with you” was the glory *before* his incarnation (“before the world existed”), a glory therefore with respect to his *divine* nature but not his *human* nature. Similarly John 17:24 says that “you [God the Father] loved me before the foundation of the world.”<sup>4</sup>

We conclude, then, that John 17 presents not merely human communication but also *divine* communication between the divine persons of the Father and the Son. That communication takes place through language. And so language is something used among the persons of the Trinity.

Of course the language recorded in John 17 is *also* language accessible to us as human beings. But it is given to us as human beings precisely so that we may know that the communication that it represents exceeds human grasp, and is divine communication. This particular piece of language in John 17 is not “merely” human, as modernist theologians sometimes claim concerning language in general. It is *also* divine. And because God is God, and is greater than we are, we can never plumb to the bottom the depths of divine communication.

### **Distinct Roles of the Persons of the Trinity in Language: Speaker, Speech, Breath**

We need to consider another striking biblical claim about language. John 1:1 calls the second person of the Trinity “the Word”:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

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4. For further discussion of this passage, and the implications for divine language, see Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1999), 16–25.

One of the backgrounds to John 1:1 is Genesis 1, where God creates the world by speaking. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). The eternal Word in John 1:1 is analogically related to the creational words that God spoke in calling the world into existence in Genesis 1, and to the words of Scripture, which are the word of God (2 Tim. 3:16). All three of these—eternal Word, creational words, and the Bible—are forms of the word of God. The latter two both make manifest the wisdom of God that has its source in the eternal Word (Col. 2:3; 1 Cor. 1:30).<sup>5</sup>

Without going into detail about these different forms, let us start with the most basic form, namely, the eternal Word, the second person of the Trinity. Calling him “the Word” indicates a relation between the Trinitarian character of God and language. In this analogical relation, God the Father is the speaker, while God the Son is the speech, “the Word.” Is there a role for the Holy Spirit? John 1:1–18 does not directly mention the Spirit, but the background passage in Genesis 1 does include the presence of the Spirit in Genesis 1:2. The Spirit “was hovering over the face of the waters.” Psalm 104, which reflects back on Genesis 1 and praises God for his works of creation, also includes a role for the Spirit:

When you hide your face, they [animals] are dismayed;  
 when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.  
 When you send forth *your Spirit*, they are created,  
 and you renew the face of the ground (Ps. 104:29–30).

The Spirit of God gives life to a new generation of animals and plants (“renew the face of the ground”). The Spirit is their empowerer. We can even see a close relation between the breath of animals, which represents their life, and the power of the Spirit of God “breathing” life into them. The connection is made explicit in Job 33:4:

The *Spirit* of God has made me,  
 and the *breath* of the Almighty gives me life.

The Hebrew word for “spirit” is *ruach*, which can also mean “breath” or “wind.” In most contexts it has only one of these three meanings, but the potential is there to invoke more than one, as happens in Job 33:4 above. In Ezekiel 37 we meet all three meanings in a passage that relates all three meanings to one another: “spirit” (37:1, 14), “wind” (37:9), and “breath” (37:5, 6, 9, 10; but closely related to “spirit” coming into dead bodies). The third person of the Trinity is named “Spirit” partly to suggest a close relation between him and the picture of the “breath” of God.

<sup>5</sup>. See *ibid.*, 27–50.

Putting these passages together with John 1:1, we can obtain a coherent picture of the persons of the Trinity as the origin of speech and language. God the Father is speaker, God the Son is the speech, and God the Spirit is the breath carrying the speech to its destination. The Spirit is also the power who brings about its effects.

### **Personal Indwelling**

The persons of the Trinity are distinct from one another. But they also mutually indwell one another. Jesus says, “Believe me that I am *in* the Father and the Father is *in* me” (John 14:11). The Father dwells in the Son and the Son in the Father.

Jesus asks the Father, concerning his disciples, “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, . . .” (John 17:21). Jesus also promises that the Holy Spirit will dwell in believers (John 14:17), and this indwelling will be an indwelling of the Son as well (John 14:20). We may conclude that the Son dwells in the Spirit. This indwelling is called *coinherence* or *perichoresis*.<sup>6</sup>

We can see one way in which coinherence is expressed when we think about the roles of the three persons of the Trinity in language. The Father’s wisdom is expressed in the Word. This expression in the Word shows that the Father dwells in the Son. The Father’s thought is in the Son. In addition, the Father’s word is in the Father even before he expresses it to the world. That implies that the Son dwells in the Father. And the Spirit, as the breath of God, works in power in conformity with the character of the Word. The Spirit is in the Son and the Son is in the Spirit. The Spirit carries out the purpose of the Father, and manifests the power of the Father, which implies that the Father dwells in the Spirit and the Spirit in the Father.

### **Speaker, Speech, and Audience**

Let us now consider the implications for three foci in communication, namely, speakers, speeches, and hearers. The Trinitarian original has God the Father as speaker and God the Son as discourse, as we have already seen. Who is the audience? There is no human audience for divine speech until the world is created. But John 16:13 mentions the Spirit as one who “hears”: “whatever he hears he will speak.” The discussion of John 16:13 is in the context of redemption, where the speech will eventually go out and be received by the disciples of Christ. But the idea of the Spirit’s hearing can be generalized, because it is surely in harmony with who the Spirit is as an eternal person of the Trinity.

6. See *ibid.*, 36–42.

The Spirit is the “breath” of God, according to our earlier argument. But the breath carries the message to a destination in personal recipients. If these are believing human recipients, we know that the Spirit in some ways stands “with” these recipients and enables them faithfully to hear (“illumination”; see 1 John 2:20–27; 1 Cor. 2:14–16). Behind these activities of the Spirit in redemption stands the character of the Spirit as an eternal person of the Trinity. The revelation in redemption invites us to think of the Spirit as recipient (audience) for the Word of God eternally.

In this respect also the persons of the Trinity coinhere. The Spirit receives the Word, and with the Word receives the message and the mind of the Father. The Spirit thus shares in the message of the Word and of the Father, and this sharing is an aspect of the mutual indwelling of the persons.

### **Enjoying and Relying on God's Presence and His Goodness**

God has impressed his Trinitarian character on language. Whenever we use language, we rely on what he has given us. We also rely on the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity. Because of this indwelling, our use of language holds together. In the use of language, we live in the presence of God who through the Spirit gives us life and through the Spirit empowers our use of language. Tacitly, we are trusting in God's faithfulness and consistency and wisdom. This is true even when non-Christians use language. But they have suppressed awareness of their dependence on God, as Romans 1:19–21 indicates:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.