

In the Beginning Was the Word

LANGUAGE—A GOD-CENTERED
APPROACH

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Contents

Chapter 1: The Importance of Language	11
Part 1: God’s Involvement with Language	
Chapter 2: Language and the Trinity	17
Chapter 3: God Speaking	23
Chapter 4: God’s Creation of Man	29
Chapter 5: God Sustaining Language	39
Chapter 6: Creativity in Language	42
Chapter 7: Exploring Examples of Language	50
Chapter 8: The Rules of Language	60
Chapter 9: God’s Rule	64
Chapter 10: Responding to God’s Government	78
Part 2: From Big to Small: Language in the Context of History	
Chapter 11: Small Pieces of Language within the Big Pieces	85
Chapter 12: Imaging	91
Chapter 13: World History	97
Chapter 14: The Fall into Sin	103
Chapter 15: Redemption through Christ	116
Chapter 16: Peoples, Cultures, and Languages	124
Chapter 17: Principles for Cultural Reconciliation	131
Chapter 18: Good and Bad Kinds of Diversity	138
Chapter 19: Human Action	149
Part 3: Discourse	
Chapter 20: Speaking and Writing	163
Chapter 21: Analysis and Verbal Interpretation	170
Chapter 22: Interpreting the Bible	180
Chapter 23: Genre	186
Part 4: Stories	
Chapter 24: Storytelling	195
Chapter 25: The Story of Redemption	206

Chapter 26: Many Mini-redemptions	209
Chapter 27: Counterfeit Stories of Redemption	219
Chapter 28: Modern Reinterpretations of Redemptive Stories	229
Chapter 29: Stories about Jesus	234
Part 5: Smaller Packages in Language: Sentences and Words	
Chapter 30: Sentences in Use: Foundations in Truth	243
Chapter 31: Foundations for Meaning in Trinitarian Inter-personal Action	251
Chapter 32: Subsystems of Language	259
Chapter 33: Words and Their Meanings	270
Chapter 34: From Words to Perspectives	280
Part 6: Application	
Chapter 35: Truth as a Perspective	289
Chapter 36: Living in the Truth	297
Interaction with Other Approaches to Language	
Appendix A: Modernism and Postmodernism	303
Appendix B: Doubt within Postmodernism	311
Appendix C: Non-Christian Thinking	320
Appendix D: Platonic Ideas	326
Appendix E: The Contribution of Structural Linguistics	332
Appendix F: Translation Theory	338
Appendix G: Symbolic Logic and Logical Positivism	350
Appendix H: The Theory of Speech Acts	353
Appendix I: Reaching Out to Deconstruction	370
Supplementary Reflections	
Appendix J: Special Cases of Human Speech	385
Bibliography	391
General Index	401
Scripture Index	411

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

Language 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.¹ 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.

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.² 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).³

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.⁴ 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).⁵

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?

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.¹ 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).² 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 5:3–4.³ 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.”⁴

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.

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).⁵

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.

5. 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*.⁶

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.

God Speaking

For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

—Psalm 33:9

God is infinitely wise, and infinitely deep in his knowledge. If God makes himself known in the textures of language, it means that language itself may be rich. Language may have not only one but many indications of its source in God. We should be on the lookout for many ways in which God shows the imprint of his presence. We will gradually explore a number of those ways.

Acts of Creation

In Genesis 1 the Bible gives the primary account of God's acts in creating the world. God created by speaking:

And God *said*, "Let there be light," and there was light (Gen. 1:3).

And God *said*, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And God made the expanse . . . (Gen. 1:6–7).

Genesis 1 contains no less than eight commandments of this type (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). In addition, there are two speeches of blessing (Gen. 1:22, 28–30) and three places where God assigns names (Gen. 1:5, 8, 10).¹

1. I am aware that many modern people do not think that Genesis 1–3 recounts real events in time and space. I differ with them. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chapter 6, gives some account of Genesis as a literary whole, and

Clearly, God's speaking has a central role in creation. This is confirmed by later statements that indicate that the whole work of creation takes place by speaking:

By the *word* of the LORD the heavens were made,
and by the *breath of his mouth* all their host (Ps. 33:6).

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).

God also brings about his acts of providence and judgment by speaking:

Who has *spoken* and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has *commanded* it?
Is it not from the *mouth* of the Most High
that good and bad come? (Lam. 3:37–38).

In Lamentations 3:38 the expression “good and bad” is comprehensive, so we may conclude that everything that happens in creation, providence, and redemption happens by God speaking. Of course this is not the only way that the Bible describes God as interacting with the world. But it is a legitimate way—one perspective on his acts.²

These activities of God speaking are important for us. If indeed God spoke to create the world, then the world from its beginning, and down to its roots, is structured by God's language. Language is not an alien imposition on the world but the very key to its being and its meaning. And if God governs the world even today through his word, then language, God's language, is also the deepest key to history and to the development of events.

Three Aspects of God's Speaking

We can further analyze God's speaking in terms of three aspects or motifs: meaning, control, and presence. Why these three? These are not the only possibilities. Any attribute of God might be used as a perspective on what it means for

why it is correct from the standpoint of literary analysis to see Genesis as recounting real events. Chapters 2–3 of the same book give some indications of why we need to trust the Bible. The harmony between Genesis and modern scientific evidence is discussed in chapters 7–10.

2. On perspectives, see Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987; reprinted, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001); John M. Frame, *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1990); Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987); Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008).

God to speak. I pick these three terms because they will prove useful in several respects.

First, the three terms are closely related to attributes of God: Meaning is related to the fact that God knows everything (God's "omniscience"). Control expresses the fact that God has boundless power and rules over everything (God's "omnipotence"). Presence says that God is present everywhere—his "omnipresence." Using these three aspects, we can trace implications of the character of God for thinking about language.

Second, the three terms are closely related to the triad of lordship that John M. Frame has widely employed in his books. In his book *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* Frame introduces three terms—"authority," "control," and "presence"—to describe God's relation to us as covenant Lord.³ I have substituted "meaning" for "authority" because meaning is particularly important when we consider language, and because meaning is one implication of authority. One significant way in which God expresses his authority over us is by expressing his commandments to us in concrete *meanings* (such as the Ten Commandments). God has authority to specify the meaning of what he creates. And, derivatively, human speakers and authors exercise authority over language in their speaking and writing.

Frame introduced his three terms to try to articulate clearly the biblical teaching concerning God's transcendence and immanence, and to contrast it with various nonbiblical alternatives.⁴ All this is pertinent to the study of language as well, because the same issues arise. Thus we can build on Frame's work, rather than doing everything afresh.

Finally, we can see a relation between these three terms and the roles of the persons of the Trinity. The Father is closely associated with being the source of meaning. Meaning originates from the plan of the Father. As executor of the Father's will, the Son is closely associated with control. The Father speaks specific orders in his word, which is the Word of the Son. By means of the Son, the Father carries out his will. And the Holy Spirit is closely associated with the presence of God. In Genesis 1:2 the Spirit hovering over the waters expresses the presence of God in creation. Since persons of the Trinity are coinherent, we expect that the three perspectives on communication, namely, meaning, control, and presence, will also be derivatively coinherent.

Meaning, Control, and Presence in God's Acts of Creation

Let us now illustrate how meaning, control, and presence are expressed in the acts in which God speaks to create the world. The primary record of God's creative

3. Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, especially 15–18.

4. See appendix C.

acts is found in Genesis 1. God repeatedly speaks. And the words he speaks have *meaning*. Each of God's utterances in Genesis 1 has specific meaning, and each specifies what will come forth. Sometimes the utterances include specifications as to how the newly created thing is to function. "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth" (Gen. 1:11). There are many specific meanings here, about trees, about fruit, about seeds that are in the fruit, about "each according to its kind," and about the process of sprouting, yielding seed, and so on. The word of God is specific in its meaning.

Second, God's words exert *control*. God's word controls the world that he creates. The immensity of his power is clearly exhibited in the immensity of the effects that his word has. As Psalm 148:5 summarizes it, "He commanded and they were created." God's word exhibits his own omnipotence.

Third, the word of God manifests the *presence* of God. The presence of God is made strikingly evident by the fact that God's word has the attributes of God. It has divine power, or omnipotence, as is evident from its power to bring forth created things that match its specification. It has divine wisdom, as is evident from the wisdom displayed in the completed creation. It has divine goodness, as is evident from the goodness of the created product (Gen. 1:31). God's word shows us God. To put it another way, the word of God is God speaking, not a "something" detached and unrelated to God himself. The close relation between God and his speaking anticipates the truth in John 1:1, where the Bible proclaims that "the Word was God."⁵

These three aspects of the word of God, namely, its meaning, control, and presence, are coinherent. They are not neatly separable, as though some parts of his word have meaning, other parts exert control, and still other parts exhibit God's presence. Rather, all three aspects are there in everything that God speaks. They are coinherent because they reflect the coinherence or mutual indwelling of the three persons of the Trinity.

We can also see that the three aspects of the word of God are coinherent by remembering that the three aspects are related to attributes of God—omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. These three attributes of God are not neatly separable. They are not "parts" of God, but each characterizes all of God. God's omnipotence is an omniscient omnipotence, and his omnipresence is an omniscient, omnipotent omnipresence. For God to be present is to be present with his power and knowledge, thus implying control and meaning. God's control, in his

5. For further reflections on the divine attributes of God's word, and for the relation of the plurality of "words" to the one "Word," the second person of the Trinity, see Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1999), chapter 3. John Frame's class lectures at Westminster Seminary first drew my attention to the divine attributes of the word of God.

omnipotence, is never an irrational control but is always exercised in accordance with his wisdom and his meaning. We could obviously extend these observations to encompass other attributes of God.

The coinherence of aspects is evident in God's speeches in creation. Consider "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). The utterance brings about the creation of light, exhibiting God's control or omnipotence. And the result is light, not something else. It has all the meaning of light. We can say that the created thing and its meaning correspond to the meaning of God's utterance. Control impresses the meaning in God's mind on the world of light, and the meaning that God has in mind specifies beforehand what the control will accomplish. Control and meaning go together. Meaning exhibits the wisdom of God, and therefore expresses his *presence* in wisdom. So God is present in light, by displaying his wisdom. Conversely, God's presence, because it is the presence of God in his fullness, always includes the presence of his control and his meaning (see chart 3.1).

Aspects of God's Word	Related Attribute of God	Illustration
meaning	omniscience	light is specified <i>as light</i>
control	omnipotence	God's command makes light exist
presence	omnipresence	God shows his goodness, power, and purity in light

CHART 3.1

God's Word to Human Beings

The three aspects of the word of God—meaning, control, and presence—also characterize the words that God speaks to human beings. This result is to be expected, since the three aspects express God's attributes and his lordship. His lordship belongs to everything he does, including all his interactions with human beings.

The Bible contains two early instances of God's communication to human beings before the fall:

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." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food" (Gen. 1:28–30).

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:16–17).

Let us focus on the second of these two speeches (Gen. 2:16–17). The distinction made between the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the other trees is obviously a use of *meaning*, distinguishing one thing from another. That may be the most obvious expression of meaning, but of course the whole speech is full of meaning, and each word within it has meaning: "tree," "eat," "you," and so on. Next, the threat of death expresses God's *control* over the consequences.

Finally, consider the theme of God's *presence*. God gave the trees and their fruit to man. He expresses his bounty, and therefore the speech expresses his presence in his goodness. In fact, every aspect of the speech expresses God's presence. God is making known to man some of the contents of his mind and his plan. It is *his* mind and *his* plan, and so man comes to know God himself in some of the ways that God thinks.

We could multiply examples expressing the three aspects of the word of God, if we extended these observations to the word of God spoken after the fall. Every word of God manifests his lordship, and therefore includes all three aspects in a unity.

When we as human beings listen to the Bible, we are listening to God's word. We experience his meaning, his control, and his presence. We learn specific information and hear specific commands (meaning); we are transformed as our minds are renewed (control; Rom. 12:1–2); and we have spiritual communion with him (presence).

The Origin of Language

In the midst of this richness, let us not forget the obvious. Language originates with God, not with man.