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God and Language[1]

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CAN GOD SPEAK TO US? Does he? The twenty-first century intellectual environments in the Western world promote suspicions about language. Unbelievers sometimes reason that language is *merely* human, and therefore incapable of expressing the nature of the divine or the transcendent. They would say that we are just talking to ourselves, and everything we say about the transcendent realm falls short of truth.

When we read the Bible, we know better. The Bible is the Word of God, God's own speech to us. God does speak to us, and he speaks effectively.

We recognize the character of the Bible because the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes to realize that it is God who speaks.[2] But can

1. This article is a summary of some of the ideas from Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

2. WCF 1.5 expresses it well: "We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness

we respond directly to the arguments of those who are skeptical? In the long run, we need to appropriate what the Bible has to say about language if we are to respond to unbelievers and to protect ourselves and other believers from the inroads of skeptical thinking about language.

Language and the Trinity

We can begin with John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In this context, "the Word" is a designation for the second person of the Trinity, but it also naturally suggests an association with language. But what is John 1:1 actually saying? The phrase *in the beginning*, as well as the continuation in John 1:2–4, alludes to Genesis 1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

The rest of Genesis 1 indicates that God performed his creative work by speaking:

> And *God said*, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Gen. 1:3)[3]
> And *God said*, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters." (Gen. 1:6)
> And *God said*, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place." (Gen. 1:9)

Psalm 33:6 sums up the work of creation:

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

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of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from *the inward work* of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts" (emphasis added).

3. Any italics within biblical quotations are my own addition.

In Genesis 1 God also addresses human beings in speech:

> 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)

John 1:1, by alluding to this background, indicates that God's own Trinitarian nature lies behind the particular words that he spoke, both words to create the world and words addressed to human beings. Language runs deep. It is deeper and older than humanity. God spoke even before there were any human beings.

Genesis 1 records God's "Let there be light" speech and his other utterances in Hebrew so that we can understand them. But we do not know what language God used when he did his work of creation. In the utterances recorded in Genesis 1:3 and 6, God was not addressing man directly, but issuing commands for the world itself to come into being. We can have confidence that he did say, "Let there be light." But we do not know the details of the language in which he spoke. Since his utterances were not addressed to us, they may not have been in any *human* language. They are nevertheless accurately represented by the Hebrew rendering (and of course a later rendering in English or some other language into which the Hebrew can be translated). It is proper for us to say that God spoke, and that he used language, though we do not know all the details.

We may make analogous observations about John 1:1, which refers to God's *eternal* speaking. "In the beginning was the Word." The phrase *in the beginning* indicates that the Word always existed. This Word did not come into being at all, but always was. "The Word was God." So the expression "the Word" in John 1:1 cannot be simply identified with the words that God spoke to create the world in Genesis 1. This eternal Word comes before them all and remains forever. He always is. He is the *original* speech of God. We can see that John points out an analogy between the one eternal Word on the one hand and, on the other, the many particular words,

that is, creational words, that God spoke according to Genesis 1. The many particular words rest ultimately on the involvement of the eternal Word in God's acts of creating the world:

> Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through whom are all things* and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6)

> For by him [God the Son] all things were created. (Col. 1:16)

The eternal Word is the archetype, the original speech of God. The words God spoke to create are derivative, but still in harmony with this eternal Word, who was active in creation. The Holy Spirit was active as well, as we see from Genesis 1:2: "And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." God's speech has the deepest possible roots, namely, in God himself, in his Trinitarian nature. The Trinity is a mystery to us. But this mystery guarantees that God's speech has depth. God says more and speaks more richly than what we are able to comprehend as creatures.

God's speech to human beings begins, as we noted, in Genesis 1:28–30. This speech, we conclude, is in harmony with the speeches he made to create the world. And it is in harmony with his eternal Word. It is empowered by the presence of the Spirit. Speech to human beings is therefore Trinitarian speech, and in harmony with the eternal speech of God. Interestingly, God speaks to human beings before there is any record of human beings speaking to one another. Human language is not *merely* human. It is not there *merely* as a practical, prosaic tool for human communication to other human beings. God is the originator. We should thank God for language; it is a gift. In addition, we should observe that this gift of language is designed by God for divine-human communication. God speaks to us in languages that he has already designed for that purpose. And we might say that such communication from God is more central even than communication among human beings, one to another. *God* addresses us. And, as

we can see fairly soon in Genesis, human beings address God in return (Gen. 3:12).

Knowledge through Language

This biblical view of language differs radically from modern views, evolutionary or otherwise, that treat language as a mere accidental or convenient tool for this world. Many people who imbibe a modern worldview are suspicious of language. They say, "How can we presume to talk about God? How do we know that language will work effectively for such a purpose? Is God beyond language?"

This kind of skepticism can be answered most effectively only if we realize that non-Christians, with hearts in rebellion against God, have a different view of the world than Christians, whose hearts are regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Non-Christians are engaged in suppressing the truth about God (Rom. 1:18–23). Among other things, they suppress the revelation of God in the very texture of language. Language derives from God, yes, from God in his Trinitarian character. It is a constant witness to him. And it is a vehicle through which he speaks. God as master of language can speak just as he pleases. Language is no inhibition for him. Moreover, it does take God speaking for us to know him. Knowledge that we claim to have about God is not true knowledge if it is merely the invention of our own minds or of our own would-be autonomous speech about God. We need to attend to God as he speaks to us in the Bible. Through the work of the Spirit he overcomes, among those whom he draws to himself, the suppression of the truth that Romans 1 delineates. Through the Spirit he creates receptive hearts so that we can hear what he says, and we know him (2 Cor. 4:4–6).

The Bible speaks boldly about the fact that we can know God through what he says:

> "And this is eternal life, that they *know* you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (John 17:3)

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"I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept *your word*. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them *the words* that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me." (John 17:6–8)

The words Jesus speaks originate from the communion among the persons of the Trinity. Those words result in knowledge of God among those whom "you gave . . . to me" (John 17:6).

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy sums it up:

We affirm that God who made mankind in His image has used language as a means of revelation.

We deny that human language is so limited by our creatureliness that it is rendered inadequate as a vehicle for divine revelation. We further deny that the corruption of human culture and language through sin has thwarted God's work of inspiration.[4]

We may now consider how a biblical view of language affects some particular issues about language and meaning.

Metaphor and Analogy

First, what about metaphor and analogy? We call God "Father." This use of the word *Father* is analogous to, rather than identical with, the use of the word for human fathers. Does the use of analogy destroy the truth of what is being said? A non-Christian view of language might claim that it does. According to such a view, the only "true truth" is literal, scientific statement

4. "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1978, Article IV, accessed May 24, 2011, http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086_CHID750054_CIID2094584,00.html.

about facts. Everything else is a kind of improper stretching of language.

But this view is at odds with the Bible's view of language. Language as a gift from God has the capability for metaphor and analogy built into it by God. We can see this capability by considering the language for "father." The original Father is God the Father in relation to his Son. God makes man in his image, and then we see that Adam becomes the first human father in analogy with the pattern when God created Adam:

> When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son *in his own likeness, after his image*, and named him Seth. (Gen. 5:2–3)

The language about "likeness" and "image" in Genesis 5:3 obviously picks up on similar language describing God's creation of man in Genesis 1:26. But now it is used to describe Adam fathering a son. The creation of man in the image of God gives a foundation for acts on the part of man that are analogical to the original acts of God.

Moreover, the language about "image of God" has an even deeper basis. We find in Colossians 1:15 that Christ is called "the image of the invisible God." Christ is the original image. The creation of man in Genesis 1 imitates this original imaging. Christ is being described in his role as Creator, so he is the *divine* image. We as creatures are creaturely images. The two are not identical. But they are analogous. God designs us to know by analogy with his knowledge. We speak by analogy with his speech (see Gen. 2:19–20). But the original analogy is divine rather than human: Christ is the image of God, and as such shows the character of the Father. He is the archetype for analogies that God ordains within this world. So God has in his wisdom built analogy into the world itself. And accordingly it is built into language. In fact, God's language governing the world specifies all analogies.

Thus analogy is not alien to language. It is built in. When rightly used, it expresses truth. We do know God the Father through the revelation of the Son in his words, as John 17 has indicated. We know what it means for him to be our Father through the Spirit's teaching (Rom. 8:15–17).

History and Interpretation

A second skeptical strain within modern worldviews concerns history and reports of events in history. Can a report in language be faithful to what actually happened? Once again, non-Christian worldviews can interfere with a proper conception of the function of language. These views obscure the character of reports about events. In non-Christian thinking, it may be claimed that the events have meaning tacked onto them by human narration. The events have no meaning until human beings narrate them. And then, since there are multiple possible narrations, the meaning belongs to each human interpreter rather than to the event itself. All historical reporting is "biased" by the input from a human reporter.

By contrast, in a Christian worldview we know that God has a plan for history. His plan precedes the events. The events have purpose and meaning in the mind of God even *before* they take place. This meaning is infinite, since it coheres with God's entire purpose for the whole of history. Our human minds are not infinite, but we are made in the image of God. Made in God's image, we can access "true truth" about events as God reveals truths that are in his mind, either through special revelation in biblical accounts of events, or through general revelation, as we ourselves observe events or hear the reports of other fallible interpreters. Fallibility does not mean universal skepticism. God has made a world in which our minds are in fundamental coherence with the world, because God has made both our minds and the world after the pattern of his will. We can really know, though we know finitely.

Because God's mind is always richer than our knowledge, we can also account for why there may be more than one true account of the same event. All true accounts given to human beings are *partial* and selective, which, it is worth emphasizing, does not make them less than true. We are constantly having to oppose the non-Christian view of knowledge, which often insists that unless we know everything (by autonomous mastery), we can know nothing. The Gospels are a good example of rich accounts of events. The Gospels differ in their selectivity at some points, but each account expresses the mind of God. All the accounts together are in harmony and express more of the mind of God than we would access through only one account.

We can of course say that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as human authors, are each giving his own "interpretation" of the events of the life of Jesus. But such interpretation is not *falsification*. Interpretation, especially when guided by the Spirit who inspired the Evangelists, draws out and re-expresses aspects of the purpose and meaning that God had in the events *from the beginning*. The human authors are not "creating" meaning, but expressing God's meaning, meaning that he already had. The events have always had meaning; there are no "bare" events with no meaning, because God controls all of history.

We can see this principle working in an obvious way with respect to the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. Old Testament symbols and prophecies lay out beforehand aspects of the meaning of the crucifixion and the resurrection. Jesus predicts these events and comments on their meaning beforehand (e.g., Mark 10:45). The Evangelists, inspired by the Spirit of Christ, then re-express the meaning after the events are accomplished. Both the differences among the Gospels and their commonalities are meanings known by God before the foundation of the world, and now expressed to us in time through the process of inspiration. God is speaking his meanings, which are *definitive* for the events.

Stability of Meaning

A non-Christian worldview may also create difficulties with respect to stability of meaning. On the one hand, non-Christians secretly aspire to be gods. They want to be the ultimate masters of meaning. So any flexibility in the range of meaning of a word or a sentence threatens to overthrow their mastery. They do not merely want stability, such as is guaranteed by the faithfulness of God to his own meanings, but godlike mastery. So they may overreach in claims about their understanding of this or that text of Scripture.

But in the cultures of the West today, people have reacted to this rationalistic extreme by going into postmodern irrationalism. A non-Christian worldview of this type admits that it falls short of absolute mastery. It then goes to the opposite extreme of ambiguity. Words, it might be claimed, may mean almost anything. And sentences may be reinterpreted indefinitely, with no visible boundaries for the endeavor. What do we say in response?

We need to avoid merely answering a non-Christian on his own terms. We must think biblically. To begin with, God's standards give us obligations. We have moral responsibility, which includes a responsibility to respect meanings from people made in the image of God. Above all, we respect meanings coming from God's own mouth, that is, the meanings in Scripture. The moral standards of God, which are absolute, give us reason for rejecting manipulative or fanciful interpretations, whereas an unbeliever, who cannot admit to absolutes, may feel free to multiply interpretations without limit.

God also provides contexts that eliminate many "theoretical ambiguities." The contexts—including the larger literary context of a biblical book, the context of the full canon of Scripture, the context of the human author, his purposes, his situation in history, and so on—all come to bear and enable us to discern that a word or a sentence is used in one way rather than another that would theoretically be possible in other circumstances. We trust God who controls all contexts, and enables us to receive his word with understanding.

We may take a particular example. Exodus 13:21 says,

The Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them *light*, that they might travel by day and by night.

What is the meaning of the word *light*? The context of guidance through the wilderness indicates that a physical light is in view, coming from the supernatural phenomenon of the pillar of fire.

Now compare this use of *light* in Exodus to John 8:12. Jesus says, "I am the *light* of the world." The context, in which Jesus is talking about himself, and the larger context of the Gospel of John, where "light" is a repeated theme, indicate that the verse is talking about Jesus' role as revealer of God the Father, and by implication his role as guide to redemption and to eternal life. We can also see that the passage in Exodus and the passage in John 8:12 are related by analogy. In Exodus God used the physical light for physical guidance, intending it as a symbol for the larger role that he had in guiding the people spiritually and morally. The word *light* when viewed apart from any context whatsoever has the capability of designating physical light, moral light, spiritual light of revelation, blinding light, and so on. The contexts enable us to appreciate what meaning belongs to a particular occurrence. And the context of the whole of the canon can enable us to appreciate relationships between analogous meanings, such as the relation between Exodus and John 8:12.

We do understand. We understand truly. But we do not understand *comprehensively*, that is, in the way that only God can understand. When Jesus says that he is the light of the world, he makes a stupendous claim that we do not fathom completely. His statement is, among other things, one of the "I am" sayings in John. He also says, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35); "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11); "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25); "I am the true vine" (John 15:1). We suspect that all these statements

resonate with the "I am" in John 8:58, where Jesus claims to be eternally existent and uses a form of speech that expresses the meaning of the Tetragrammaton (the "I am" of Ex. 3:14).

God is light (1 John 1:5). The ultimate anchorage for the word *light* is in God himself, who is light. God by his own character and faithfulness gives ultimate stability to meaning in this world. He shows himself to us in speech, including speech about light. He makes definite claims. Only God knows himself perfectly and exhaustively. But we do not need to be God in order to know him truly by receiving his speech in the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The One and the Many

Still another difficulty arises in a non-Christian approach to language. How can words like *horse* apply to a multitude of horses? How do we know what we are talking about? The difficulty can be generalized to apply not only to language but also to the world about which we speak. Why are there many horses with one common pattern, belonging to one species? This difficulty is called the problem of the one and the many. How does the one, namely, the general category of horse, relate to the many, namely, the many horses?

Darwinian naturalism thinks it has an answer in unguided Darwinian evolution. Evolution produces both a species and the members of the species. But Darwinian naturalism does not give us an answer to the deeper difficulty: why is there order at all? Naturalism depends on the concept of scientific law, which provides a foundation for the unity of the species and the unity of species behavior. Why does law have the character of unity (a single law) and diversity (applying to many individual instances)? And why does human language express this unity and diversity? Is language adequate to the world?

A Christian view of language, as usual, traces meanings back to God. It is God who has established both the one and the many

in the world by his speech. And his speech coheres with himself. God is one God in three persons. God himself offers us the ultimate instance of one and many. Out of this one and many in God, he creates a world with one and many according to the specifications of his word of command. God's language specifies one and many. Human language, which reflects God's language, also is capable of interacting with one and many. That is why we have one word, *horse*, that we can use to designate many horses as well as the species horse.

By contrast, modern non-Christian worldviews are typically *nominalistic*. Words are names ("nominal") that we humans invent (out of thin air?) to produce unity. Is the unity then a humanly imposed illusion? Immanuel Kant came near to this idea by arguing that the categories of time, space, and causality were imposed on phenomena by the human mind. In this view, human beings virtually "create" the world of experience. But this kind of view threatens a radical subjectivism. And once we lose the conviction that all human minds are basically the same, we can arrive at a postmodern skepticism about both the unity of meaning and knowledge. Meaning and so-called "knowledge" are alleged to be "created" by human societies by their conventions. And differences among different societies threaten the unity of meaning and knowledge for humanity as a whole.

According a biblical worldview, God has created the world and human beings. He has given us as human beings language in analogy with his language specifying the one and many in the world. The harmony in God's plan leads to a basic harmony among language, human beings, and the world—in which radical skepticism has no place.

Conclusion

In sum, assumptions about language do have an influence when people consider the claims of Scripture. Many modern thinkers

assume that human language is *merely* human, merely a pragmatic tool for managing a world of bare or "brute" facts, facts with no intrinsic grounding in language. The Bible presents us with a very different picture. God made the world and governs it by the wisdom of his providence. Moreover, he governs by *speaking.* The world in its overall structure and in the details of its history is the product of language—God's language. Human beings are creatures, not God. But we are made in the image of God, and the language that God has given us as a gift is designed by God. So it matches both the world and the nature of God as he reveals himself when he speaks in language.

This biblical conception of language provides responses to various objections and skeptical theories about language. "God-talk," language about God, is not intrinsically problematic. It is not a "stretching" of language beyond its design, but a use according to its design. People can of course use language to express heretical or blasphemous thoughts about God. But this is a difficulty created by the fall and by sin, not a difficulty intrinsic to the metaphysical character of language as given by God.

Skeptics also doubt whether historical events can be adequately described in language, whether language provides stable meanings, and whether language is problematic because of the problem of the one and the many. A biblical basis for understanding language provides coherent responses to these objections. The Bible is still the Word of God, and still expresses truth about God, truth about history, truth about meaning, and truth about the one and the many. In these and other questions, we are not supposed to follow in our thinking the way of the world, but the way of Christ, as he has taught us by speaking in Scripture (2 Cor. 10:5).