

In the Beginning Was the Word

LANGUAGE—A GOD-CENTERED
APPROACH

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C H A P T E R 1

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?