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## IMAGING COMMUNION: AN ARGUMENT FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE BASED ON SPEECH

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### I. *Introduction*

No one can deny that speech plays an integral role in allowing one person to commune with another. Epictetus said that silence is safer than speech,<sup>1</sup> but if that is the case, we do not want safety; we prefer the hazards of relationships to the seclusion of silence, and evidence of this is all around us. In the morning, we emerge from the world of disheveled dreams seeking another person to help us find some solace in the confusion. Throughout the day we dialogue with co-workers and use words to forge new relationships with strangers, and when we arrive at home, we stream the day's events to our family with the subtle hope that they will know where and how we have been. In the evening, we lie down and utter a final few words to our spouse before drifting into sleep again. We are always looking to join minds, and that is where speech comes into play. Speech fosters communion: it joins one mind to another, and this seems the most natural thing in the world to us.

But where does this longing for communion come from, and why does speech seem to be the perfect medium for achieving it? Is speech just a product of our ongoing communicative evolution? Are we content to say that speech is simply a unique human faculty, regardless of where it came from and why it functions coherently? I do not think so. To say, with Noam Chomsky, that "when we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the 'human essence,'" is not so helpful.<sup>2</sup> Even if language is part of what it means to be human, that still does not explain our longing for communion, nor does it suggest anything of why speech functions coherently, of why it is effective in fostering communion. In fact, it leads us to the door of metaphysics: why do we exist this way? Evolution is not an answer to this question; it glibly skirts the issue by providing a string of how's, which brings us, eventually, back to where we started.

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<sup>1</sup> Epictetus, *Fragment 29*.

<sup>2</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (enlarged ed.; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 1.

In the following pages, I will argue that speech, one of the most basic human behaviors, serves as evidence for God's existence. But, in contrast to other proofs for God's existence that reason inductively from creation to the Creator, I do the opposite, relying on God's revelation of himself in Scripture. Such an approach, to some, may be unhelpful. Once one plays the "Scripture card," the logical game goes foul. But does it?

The metaphysical door must be opened, and behind it lies a single word: creature. This is what we are, and this leads us to why we exist the way we do. Creatures, by definition, are bound, finite; in fact, their separation from the creator is so great that they would have no knowledge of him but by his voluntary, covenantal condescension (WCF 7.1). It pleased God to carry out this covenantal condescension through speech, not through general revelation (including reason). God's speech to us, both pre- and post-fall, enacted something that general revelation could not; in God's perfect goodness, he "declared to [Adam and his posterity] by the word, happiness itself and the way to reach it (of which reason was ignorant)."<sup>3</sup>

God's special revelation via speech, then, was a divinely willed, and hence necessary, accommodation. Now, some may question whether Scripture was necessary. God could, it is suggested, simply continue to speak to his creatures and have those creatures relay the messages to the rest of creation. But we are reminded that the written word was just as necessary as the spoken word, given the context in which it occurred (post-fall). God's spoken word is without error; man's spoken words are, on the other hand, laced with them. Hence,

Scripture is the only adequate means of guarding against the corruption of the spoken word and of making it the possession of all human beings. The sound of a voice passes away, but the written letter remains. The brevity of life, the unreliability of memory, the craftiness of the human heart, and a host of other dangers that threaten the purity of transmission all make the incription of the spoken word absolutely necessary if it is to be preserved and propagated.<sup>4</sup>

God's speech to his creatures, both aural, and thereafter written, makes all the more sense when we look at God's character. Because God is the self-sufficient, interpersonal, and communicative being that he is, Scripture is the best source of our knowledge of him and ourselves. A triune being who has spoken with himself for eternity past and will do so for eternity future would naturally use language to reveal himself; and creatures whose first behavior was to listen (Gen 1:28) to their Creator would naturally need spoken and (given the fall)

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Turretin, "Second Topic: The Holy Scriptures," in *Thy Word Is Still Truth: Essential Writings on the Doctrine of Scripture from the Reformation to Today* (ed. Peter Lillback and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013), 346. Turretin adds, "God can be savingly known and worshipped only by his light, just as the sun makes itself known to us only by its own light (Ps 36:9)."

<sup>4</sup> Herman Bavinck, "Chapter 14: Attributes of Scripture," in Lillback and Gaffin, *Thy Word Is Still Truth*, 635.

written revelation. It is this truth that repels any apology for God's existence based purely on nature, especially after the fall. Nature certainly reveals God (Rom 1), but it reveals a God towards whom we are at enmity. We have crippled creation with sin, and so when we go to nature for knowledge of God, we get it, but it is not quite what we thought we wanted. Nature, Bavinck reminds us, speaks nothing of grace and forgiveness,<sup>5</sup> and so we cannot look solely to nature to develop a defense of the triune God. There we will only find a bare form of theism that hints at the character of the Christian God. If forgiveness and grace—two critical concepts for communion in a fallen world—are important to us, we must go to God's special revelation. Scripture may not be in vogue as the basis for true knowledge of God, but the truth cares little for fashion. God has spoken definitively and redemptively in his word, condescending to commune with his creatures. It is that God whom we worship; it is that God whom I aim to affirm.

## II. *The Triad of Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Language*

If we are going to talk about speech, we cannot isolate it from other human behaviors, nor can we leave out a discussion of metaphysics and epistemology.<sup>6</sup> For our purposes, we will keep this concise so that we can focus our attention on the argument at hand.

Simply put, language is a product of thought, and thought is a product of being.<sup>7</sup> Any discussion of speech, then, presupposes a certain metaphysic and

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<sup>5</sup> General Revelation “somewhat illumines the mind and restrains sin but does not regenerate the nature of human beings and the world. It can instill fear but not trust and love” (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena* [ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2003], 313).

<sup>6</sup> Here I side with Kenneth Pike: “Language is behavior, i.e., a phase of human activity which must not be treated in essence as structurally divorced from the structure of nonverbal human activity. The activity of man constitutes a structural whole, in such a way that it cannot be subdivided into neat ‘parts’ or ‘levels’ or ‘compartments’ with language in a behavioral compartment insulated in character, content, and organization from other behavior. Verbal and nonverbal activity is a unified whole, and theory and methodology should be organized or created to treat it as such” (Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* [2d ed.; Paris: Mouton, 1967], 26).

<sup>7</sup> The biblical foundation for this reasoning comes from 1 Cor 2:11-13: “For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.” A person's thoughts are inherently connected to his being, his spirit. Christians, Paul tells us, have received the Spirit of God, and we impart the spiritual truths we have been taught not with our own words, but with the words of the Spirit. The word, then, is the medium that takes the things “freely given us by God,” i.e., God's thoughts, and communicates them to others. In sum, by God's grace we are made new creatures in Christ (being), so that we can be spiritually instructed concerning God's thoughts (thought), in order to communicate those thoughts through the Spirit's words (language). This paradigm holds for unbelievers as well, but

epistemology.<sup>8</sup> If these are cut from the equation, we are left with a stilted notion of speech. Our epistemology, of course, is rarely declared. It shows up implicitly in our use of words, which, as we just said, reflect our thoughts. In light of this triad of metaphysics, epistemology, and language, a few things need to be said.

With regard to metaphysics, because we are made in the image of the triune God of Scripture, we are relational beings, just as God is relational in his trinity. But we are also creatures—limited, a status often forgotten or ignored by scholars studying language. The Creator-creature distinction—something that should be engrained in all of Christian thought but which is often left by the wayside—will be at the forefront of this discussion. In light of the Creator-creature distinction, speech will never be reductionistically explained via creation—not because it is too complex, but because it is rooted in an eternal being whom we cannot comprehensively understand.<sup>9</sup> That fact needs to be taken into account when we explore the coherence of speech. We are creatures handling a Creator’s gift.

With regard to epistemology, we think God’s thoughts after him, analogically.<sup>10</sup> We do not think univocally (to the same extent and in the same manner as God) or equivocally (as if language were inherently unreliable, instable, and subjective). We will discuss this in more detail below, but the point to keep in mind here is that God thinks as a relational being and we do so on an analogical level.

Lastly, with regard to language, we need to remember that it is fundamentally communal. Language is the key that unlocks the doors of our minds so that

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with drastically different consequences. Their spirit is lost, and so their thoughts are confused as they try to suppress the truth (Rom 1:18), which produces words that, at their best, appear to be wise but which are, in fact, foolish (Rom 1:22).

<sup>8</sup> It is critical that we not separate ontology from epistemology. Van Til noted that “God’s knowledge is what it is because his being is what it is” (Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* [ed. William Edgar; 2d ed.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003], 26). See also Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (ed. K. Scott Oliphint; 4th ed.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 56-57; K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), 41, 69 n. 22. The moment we attempt to define epistemology apart from ontology, we do so for a fictitious being; the moment we attempt to define ontology apart from epistemology, we make baseless assertions.

<sup>9</sup> So, in a sense, yes, because it is too complex, and because, as Pike points out, it cannot be detached from other human behaviors. However, we can treat all of human behavior from the perspective of *creatures*. In fact, that is precisely what the biblical narrative demands that we do.

<sup>10</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 62, 67, 70-71, 183, 376; Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 77; Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God* (ed. William Edgar; 2d ed.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 31, 33, 42, 177-78, 185, 292, 363; Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 16, 17, 38, 47, 172, 278. See also paragraph 12 of John M. Frame, “A Primer on Perspectivalism,” <http://www.frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism/> (accessed June 6, 2013); and Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 268.

we can relate to other beings.<sup>11</sup> It is not, first and foremost, a tool for information acquisition. It is not a self-serving social faculty. It is a behavior that allows interaction, which of course then leads to other uses such as the gathering of information and caring for one's physical and social needs.

One final caveat before examining the argument from speech: any epistemology has to have a metaphysical base. If we fail to ground our thought in being, then we make, oddly enough, groundless assertions: superficially coherent claims that have no root in a larger metaphysical framework. Without that framework, we are like ducks whose legs are churning the pond water they wish to ignore. But the water itself is what bears them up. We cannot use our epistemological capabilities while simultaneously denying that there exists a metaphysical explanation for them—not just because a metaphysical base is logically necessary (which it is), but because that metaphysical base profoundly influences how we define our epistemology at the outset.<sup>12</sup> This may seem a small error, but, as Aquinas reminds us, “a small error at the outset can lead to great errors in the final conclusions.”<sup>13</sup>

### III. *The Argument*

Now, on to the argument.

Premise 1	Every human behavior is coherent only because it is an analog of a divine behavior.
Premise 2	God is a triune being who communes with himself via speech (a divine behavior).
Premise 3	Humans commune with one another via speech.
Premise 4	Human speech presupposes the co-inherence of the Trinity.
Conclusion	Therefore, each time we speak we affirm the existence of the triune God of Scripture.

#### **Premise 1: Every human behavior is coherent only because it is an analog of a divine behavior.**

This first premise may require more extensive treatment than the others. By “coherent” we mean logical and consistent. But, when it comes to behavior, logical consistence also leads to effectiveness: the behavior accomplishes its purposed end.

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<sup>11</sup> “The modern impersonalist worldview thinks of the human mind as a closed room. But when God created us, he intended our human minds to be open rooms in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit dwell” (Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2012], 134).

<sup>12</sup> A shorter way to put this would be to say that both our being and our thought are grounded in God as the *principium essendi* and the *principium cognoscendi*. God is both our ground of being and our ground for knowing.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Aquinas, prologue to *De Ente et Essentia*.

God is the ultimate coherent being, supremely logical and consistent. This has to do both with his omniscience and his simplicity. With regard to the former, Francis Turretin is quite helpful:

Concerning the intellect of God and the disquisition of his knowledge, two things above all others must be attended to: the mode and the object. The mode consists in his knowing all things perfectly, undividedly, distinctly and immutably. . . . Perfectly because he knows all things by himself or by his essence. . . . Undividedly, because he knows all things intuitively and noetically. . . . Distinctly . . . because he most distinctively sees through all things at one glance. . . . Immutably, because with him there is no shadow of change. . . .

The object of the knowledge of God is both himself . . . and all things extrinsic to him whether possible or future.<sup>14</sup>

The mode and object of God's knowledge cover both the manner and matter of his knowing. To put it negatively, there is no way in which God's knowledge is incomplete, restricted, or qualitatively wanting, and there exists no object of which he does not have holistic and uncompromised apprehension. Now, here is the key: God's knowledge of all things accounts for logical consistency, for "everything in the created universe . . . displays the fact that it is controlled by God, that it is what it is by virtue of the place that it occupies in the plan of God."<sup>15</sup> The facts comprising our knowledge can only be called such because of the "systematic relation they sustain to God."<sup>16</sup> His knowledge of every fact and how each one relates to his comprehensive plan to redeem the cosmos is the very ground upon which the notion of coherence is built. God does not adhere to the principle of coherence; he is its author.

God's simplicity also factors into the coherence of his behavior—largely contributing to his consistency. Consistency can be a problem for beings composed of parts, for then each of those parts—an attribute—could have its own "pull," thus threatening the consistency of that being's behavior. This is not the case for the God of Scripture. "God's attributes are not characteristics or properties that exist . . . in any way outside of God, such that his having such a characteristic or property entails his participation in something other than himself. God is his characteristics and his characteristics are identical to him."<sup>17</sup> Because God's characteristics are identical with his being, the fissure of doubt closes upon his consistency.<sup>18</sup> His behavior—no matter what it is—can only be congruous with his being, and because his being denies "all possibility of change, as much with

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<sup>14</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Gieger; 3 vols.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992–1996), 1:207.

<sup>15</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 253. See also Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 37–38.

<sup>16</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 121.

<sup>17</sup> K. Scott Oliphint, *God With Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 64.

<sup>18</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 31.

respect to existence as to will,"<sup>19</sup> there is no reason to doubt the consistency of his behavior.

We noted at the outset of this section that coherence leads naturally to effectiveness, and we find that God's behaviors never fail to carry out the effects he intends. This is especially germane to our discussion of speech, for throughout Scripture we find confirmations of the effectiveness of God's spoken words. In the Pentateuch, there already exists the assumption that God's speech is inescapably effective, firstly, because he does not lie: "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Num 23:19). Complementing the verity of God's words is the surety that what he says comes to fruition. The psalmist writes, "For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps 33:9). And Isaiah adds poetically,

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10-11)

Throughout Jeremiah and Ezekiel we see the clause "for I have spoken" as the cause for what is about to take place.<sup>20</sup> God's speech is utterly effective: what he speaks comes to be precisely as he intended, and we would expect nothing less from one whose omniscience, omnipotence, and simplicity are tied to his very being.

Now, why must every human behavior be an analog of divine behavior if it is to be coherent? We noted that the definition of "coherence" is to be "logically consistent," and that God is the very author of the concept. But how can we account for logical consistence if we are (1) finite, and hence cannot grasp all of known reality in order to verify logical consistency for a certain behavior; and (2) fallen, and hence noetically corrupt? In tandem with these questions is the question of effectiveness. Why are human behaviors—particularly the behavior of speech—effective in accomplishing the ends we have in mind for them?

We account for logical consistence as God's creatures by relying on his faithful and perspicuous revelation. God's revelation in Scripture accommodates us as limited creatures; it is a kind of condescending communication, if we remove the negative connotations from the adjective. We cannot reason up to God's level of exhaustive knowledge in order to verify experientially whether or not something is logically consistent. That would be to make the creature the Creator, to replace the Eimi with the eikon, the self-sustaining God with the derivative and dependent creature.<sup>21</sup> As eikonic beings, we think God's thoughts after

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<sup>19</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:204.

<sup>20</sup> We understand וְ in this clause to be a causal conjunction. See GKC §158.

<sup>21</sup> Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith*, 176-81.

him on a true but creaturely level. We reason analogically, not univocally, and so we can, in reliance upon God's revelation in Scripture, verify the coherence of a human behavior. This does not mean that we understand it exhaustively, only that we know something true about what it is and how it functions.

That addresses the limitation of creatures, but what about the noetic corruption? Sadly, the human mind cannot account for logical coherence at all—that is, unless it has been redeemed by the work of Christ. At the fall, the unity of human experience and behavior was shattered like a fine glass vase, shards extending to the edges of creation's floor. Thus entered the problem of the one and the many. This was not a "problem" before. It only became one in the sense that fallen creation now held unity to be at enmity with diversity—not to mention that man's sense of the one and the many was now riddled with sin, which plagued his faculties and inflated his pride. But such is not the case with the triune God of Scripture, the three-in-one. Man has broken covenant with the God who holds unity and diversity together in perpetual and perfect harmony. It is only such a being who can redeem the mind of fallen man, and that is precisely what redemption does.

The diversity of experience, riddled as it is with sin, could only be united and brought into coherence by the sovereign action of God. Creation refused to be truly eikonic, striving instead to piece together a notion of coherence without reference to the God of Scripture, which, based on what we have said about coherence, is the definition of absurdity.<sup>22</sup> We could not try to write a novel in the style of Mark Twain while at the same time denying his existence. On a cosmic scale, this is what we have been trying to do. We have rejected the notion that we are eikonic, refusing to image the Creator and think his thoughts after him. We have boarded the ship of univocality and set sail for a country of make-believe, but the anchor of contingency is wedged in the sand.

Yet, even before the boat was in the harbor God knew it would play out this way. Turretin's words ring true: God's knowledge is perfect as it pertains to "all things extrinsic to him whether possible or future." He knew that in the person of Christ, the Eimi/eikon relationship would be restored, that the second Adam would be faithful where the first Adam fell, and that we would rediscover what true coherence meant only when we received the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16).

In our examination of coherent human behavior we are left now only with the question of effectiveness. Why is any human behavior effective only because it is an analog of a divine behavior?<sup>23</sup> The short of it is that the very idea of

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<sup>22</sup> "That which is *truly* absurd is whatever is in opposition to God. . . . Absurdity, therefore, has to be measured not in terms of what we can comprehend, but in terms of what God has said to us" (K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2013], 83-84).

<sup>23</sup> We will not here get into the issue of the effectiveness of wicked behaviors. Suffice it to say that God uses the effectiveness of wicked behaviors (which still are only effective by his allowance) for the good of his people. We might say that wicked behavior is a corrupted or contorted analog of divine behavior, just as the serpent's deceptive speech in the Garden of Eden.

effectiveness presupposes teleology: a purpose in relation to a larger scheme of occurrences. Just as God's omniscience and simplicity are the grounds for the definition of coherence, so his plan for redemption is the grounds for effectiveness. It may be helpful here to make a distinction between "alleged effectiveness" and "true effectiveness." Alleged effectiveness is all around us: a child's temper tantrum is effective in altering his parents' response to him; a shopkeeper is effective in keeping people out of his shop after hours by locking the door. These actions have immediate effects, certainly, but "true effectiveness" is rooted not solely in the immediate, but in the eternal. In Luke's Gospel, the rich man was allegedly effective in storing up wealth for himself, but he was not truly effective, for his life was taken from him and his behavior was shown to be completely ineffective (Luke 12:16-21). He died in spiritual poverty.

So, the effectiveness of a behavior is relegated to God and his plan for history. Truly effective behaviors are only possible within that plan. When we try to build a case for effectiveness based purely on allegedly effective behavior at the creaturely level, we end up with a partial and dissatisfying view of effectiveness, perhaps resembling some form of Marxism: effectiveness is decided and executed by the powerful. If we value true effectiveness, we will accept that human behaviors are only coherent and effective because they are analogs of eternally coherent and effective divine behaviors. God's knowledge and being account for our knowledge and being; the coherence and effectiveness of his divine behaviors account for the coherence and effectiveness of our creaturely behaviors. Gaffin draws the same conclusion when examining Ps 94:9 ("He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?"). His summary is a fitting end to our discussion of the first premise:

These questions are plainly rhetorical and, within the broader framework of biblical teaching, highlight that capacities in human beings, like hearing and seeing, do not merely derive from God but are reflective of his own divine capacities.

Surely, then, by extension and in the same vein, we are to ask, "Does he who shaped the tongue not speak?" Here we are pointed to recognize this overall state of affairs: As our being itself is derived from God (we exist because he exists), and as our knowledge is an analogue of his knowledge (we know because he knows), so, too, our capacity for language and other forms of communication is derivative of his. We speak because God speaks, because he is a speaking God; that is his nature and so, derivatively, it is ours. In other words, man in his linguistic functions, as in all he is and does, is to be understood as the creature who is the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). In fact, should we not say that especially in his language man reflects the divine image he is?<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Speech and the Image of God: Biblical Reflections on Language and Its Uses," in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries* (ed. David VanDrunen; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 182-83.

**Premise 2: God is a triune being who communes with himself via speech (a divine behavior).**

J. I. Packer once quipped that every biblical passage assumes two facts: that God is king and that he speaks.<sup>25</sup> “Kudos,” we think, “well said, Packer.” But the second part of his statement has ground breaking implications for our understanding of speech, especially when applied not just to creation, but to the Trinity itself.

First, we know that God speaks not just because God speaks to us, and “his outward work (his being *ad extra*) corresponds to or images God’s inner life (his being *ad intra*),” but because Scripture reveals a God who communes with himself via speech.<sup>26</sup> One manifestation of this truth is the doctrine of *perichoresis*, “the reciprocal presence and interpenetration of the three divine persons.”<sup>27</sup> But this doctrine does not quite get at the point we are making here. There certainly is an interpenetration of the three divine persons, but we are arguing that at least one of the means by which this is achieved is through language—of some kind. Poythress reminds us,

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.<sup>28</sup>

Where do we find evidence for such a claim? Arguably throughout all of Scripture, but there are a few passages worth noting here.

In the OT, God’s plurality of being is first brought to the fore in the creation narrative. In addition to God bringing creation “into nothing” with the triadic medium of speech—speaker, speech, and breath—we also see God communing with himself. In Gen 1:26, we meet the Hebrew cohortative, a verbal form that is the subject of much scholarly debate.<sup>29</sup> Our impetus for interpreting the form

<sup>25</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1975), 109.

<sup>26</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Triune Discourse: Theological Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks (Part 2)” in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship* (ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 51. More concisely, Gerald Bray states, “What God does in time reflects who and what he is in eternity” (Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2012], 29). Vanhoozer wants to formulate an understanding of speech based on the economic Trinity rather than the immanent Trinity, but I feel he does not go far enough with this. It is not just in the economic Trinity that we see the foundation for speech and communicative behavior, but in God’s very being, beyond the work of creation.

<sup>27</sup> Gerald O’Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (New York: Paulist, 1999), 206, quoted in Lane G. Tipton, “The Function of *Perichoresis* and the Divine Incomprehensibility,” *WTJ* 64 (2002): 290.

<sup>28</sup> Poythress, *In the Beginning*, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Waltke outlines the six options we have for interpretation: (1) the plural is a remnant of ancient Near Eastern myth in which God is addressing other gods. This is untenable given that the Pentateuch opposes polytheism at every turn. (2) The plural is directed towards a host of previously

as an instance of God's inter-trinitarian dialogue (perhaps better, "trialogue") is as follows: first, aside from the fact that a speaking God would necessitate inner plurality, the only other truly viable option is that God is addressing his heavenly court.<sup>30</sup> But I find this view wanting on a number of levels. Why would God be addressing other creatures in a creative action that is attributed solely to his power? He certainly is not looking for approval or input from contingent beings. Is he simply announcing what he is doing? This would be a strange precedent, given the other grammatical structures employed to bring in other aspects of creation. Yet, it would make perfect sense if God chose to employ this particular grammatical structure exclusively in the creation of man because he was creating a being who would image himself in personal relations. This would certainly pair nicely with Gen 2:18. Adam is not "lonely." God is not working out divine psychoanalysis. Rather, God knows that it would be "good" for Adam to commune with other creatures equal with himself because that is what God does, and God is wholly good.

Now, in response to those who would suggest that God's use of speech was strictly covenantal (i.e., he created it along with the rest of creation), there is other support. Unlike the light, which has an explicit origin in God as well as in the objects of creation,<sup>31</sup> linguistic or communicative behavior is, mysteriously, without a fixed origin. God simply appears on the scene and begins speaking. The repeated Hebrew grammatical structure used to introduce God's speech, **וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים**, suggests not the genesis of language but the inveterate choice of this being to use it in creating the cosmos. Some may view it as a stretch, but we get the impression as readers that we have somehow already fallen behind: "Well, of course God spoke to create. What else would he do? He is a speaking being." And, in light of the fact that art is always a few steps ahead of the

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made creatures. This still ends up relying on polytheistic tendencies that do not comport with the Genesis account. (3) The plural is honorific, like the form **אֱלֹהִים**, but Waltke notes that this form is elsewhere attested by nouns, not pronouns. (4) The plural is, in Gesenius's language, "a plural of *self-deliberation*," though no other instance supports this view. (5) The plural is a reference to the Trinity. This view would be supported by later NT texts, even though Waltke argues that this violates the boundaries of grammatico-historical interpretation. (6) The plural refers to the heavenly court that surrounds God's throne. See Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: A Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 212-13.

<sup>30</sup> See Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 12.

<sup>31</sup> Here I follow those who suggest that God is a light unto himself. The light that he creates first is not earthly light, but a kind of self-referential light based upon which he creates earthly light. See Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 61; Jacob Milgrom, "The Alleged 'Hidden Light,'" in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman; JSJSup 83; Boston: Brill, 2004), 44; and Mark S. Smith, "Light in Genesis 1:3—Created or Uncreated: A Question of Priestly Mysticism," in *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Chaim Cohen et al.; 2 vols.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 1:127-31.

wider culture,<sup>32</sup> we might do well to note that two of the most colossal figures in twentieth-century literature, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, both wrote fictional creation accounts that address the issue here. Each account is unique, but one feature they both share is that God sings creation into existence: vocalization brings actualization; the sound brings the substance.<sup>33</sup> It would be no stretch to say that these authors pulled such a concept from the Genesis account and assumed, with the author of Genesis, that language would be God's natural medium for creation because its roots run deeper than creation itself. Language is part of who God is as an eternal, relational being.<sup>34</sup>

Other OT references to God's plurality could be explored (including the "angel of the Lord" passages [Gen 21, 22, 31], Pss 45:6-7; 110:1, and the personalization of terms such as "wisdom" and "word"),<sup>35</sup> but I would rather focus on a NT passage that illumines God's eternal history of self-communication, John 17:4-5. In fervent prayer to his Father, Jesus Christ says, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."

Beings give glory to one another via praise, and praise necessitates communicative behavior. How else would God glorify the Son if not through communicating praise? We see instances of God's praise for the Son already in other parts of the NT. Consider the striking account of Jesus' baptism, towards the beginning of his ministry: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased'" (Luke 3:21-22). God is pleased with the Son long before his climactic work of redemption on the cross, before the unparalleled event of the resurrection. In fact, God's pleasure in the Son, his praise for the Son's worth, is not merely a mark of the economic Trinity. It is rather, in Vanhoozer's terms, a mark of the immanent Trinity, the eternal triune community. The Son has always been praised by the Father; the Father has always communicated his praise to the Son. The Spirit

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<sup>32</sup> Francis Schaeffer discusses what he calls the "line of despair." This was a trend in thinking (originating in the 19th century) that rejected absolutes and antithesis, instead favoring dialectics and existentialism. The line of despair was realized first by philosophy, then by art, then music, then general culture, and finally in theology. The arts, according to Schaeffer, were always a few steps ahead of the broader culture. See *The God Who Is There*, in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: The God Who Is There, Escape from Reason, and He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 5-9.

<sup>33</sup> For Lewis, see the end of ch. 8 and the beginning of ch. 9 in *The Magician's Nephew*. For Tolkien, see the first chapter of *The Silmarillion*, entitled "The Music of the Ainur."

<sup>34</sup> "In short, this God who made the universe—establishing an order within the vast range of variety, with human beings as the crown of his creation, representing him as his image bearers—is relational. Communion and communication are inherent to his very being" (Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004], 21).

<sup>35</sup> See *ibid.*, 21-32.

also has always partaken of this glorious triologue. God's praise for himself is the actual basis of communicative activity for his creatures.

Also in the scriptural witness, we find evidence of God's speech in the fact that God is personal, and "personality does not develop nor exist in isolation, but only in association with other persons. Hence it is not possible to conceive of personality in God apart from an association of equal persons in Him. His contact with creatures would not account for His personality any more than man's contact with the animals would explain his personality."<sup>36</sup> It is these "equal persons" who commune with one another in the Godhead. In God's eternal *perichoresis* he was communing with himself, and what else is language—speech—if not a means whereby one person communes with another?

The reason why we are to take "God's Trinitarian self-communication as the paradigm of what is involved in all true communication"<sup>37</sup> is not simply because God speaks to his creation—for, as Berkhof noted, this would not reflect God's personality; it would merely reflect his creative capabilities. It is not simply that he is willing to condescend and accommodate his creatures. Even if we grant this route for the sake of argument, the creatures to whom he is condescending are made in his image! They presuppose analogical qualities and faculties that until that point only functioned within the Godhead.

Is it not strange that Adam had linguistic tendencies before the creation of Eve? This, perhaps more than anything else, may have prompted God to say, "It is not good for the man to be alone." This is not an assessment of Adam's emotional status; it is a witness to Adam's inherent, image-made capacity to commune with other persons. It is not "good" for a being made in the image of the communicating God to lack an equal partner in communication. Hence, Eve enters the scene. In an act as poetic as it is sacred, a piece of Adam is removed and used to form the woman, not because women are derivative or inferior, but because the person must come from Adam's own being. Just as God's being is the commonality of the three persons, so Adam's being is the commonality for this other person (Hebrew: אָדָם, Adam's counterpart or corresponding being). It would not be "good" for Adam to exist purely as a unit; communion necessitates plurality. Whereas in God this is internal, in creation it is external.

This is all the more apparent when we reflect on God as the being who brings unity and plurality into perfect harmony. God is not a fragmented being simply because he is tri-personal. In the words of the shema, God is still אֱלֹהִים (one) even while he is three persons: this is part of the Creator-creature distinction. We bifurcate and analyze; we try to reduce categories such as unity and plurality to mutually exclusive descriptors, as good Aristotelians should, claiming that "paradox" is really just a fool's word for "incoherent." The truth of the matter

<sup>36</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (new ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 85.

<sup>37</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 199.

is that this alleged paradox is the only thing that accounts for coherence in the first place. Coherence finds its fulfillment in the tri-personal God of Scripture, who alone is able to account for union and communion while simultaneously accounting for plurality.<sup>38</sup> All of human behavior, especially linguistic behavior, presupposes God's eternal unity and diversity: we are separate, unique beings who are built to commune with other separate beings. The human race as a whole is revelatory of the glory of the Trinity.

In light of the scriptural witness, we can say with confidence that God is a triune being who communes with himself via speech, and that this very fact constitutes speech as a divine behavior, which we as creatures have inherited as his image-bearers.

**Premise 3: Humans commune with one another via coherent speech.**

If there is a premise in this argument that requires little, if any, support, it is this one. I hesitate to argue for it at all. But we can remind ourselves of a few things regarding this premise.

First, though we do use speech to commune with one another, we also frequently use it for the purpose of “dis-union.” The fragmentation of our current society is enough evidence to convince any simpleton that we have taken the plurality inherent in God's being, and, in a sinful application to the rest of creation, have tried to make language something that fosters our own continuing isolation. We come up with pithy maxims like “the mind is a prison” in order to justify our misunderstanding of language as a faculty that is meant to bind unity with diversity together in God's creatures. The mind is not a prison barring others from engaging with our thoughts or emotions; it is, perhaps, a room with a door that is often closed, but language is the key always left sitting in the lock. We know this, and we remember it every time we have a meaningful encounter with another human being via speech.

Second, the adjective “coherent” cannot be used so frequently to describe human speech, not because it lacks the ability to evoke that quality, but because language is always being used by creatures who only occasionally scratch the surface of divine coherence—the quintessence of that coherence being the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ is the word of God, spoken by God

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<sup>38</sup> “In every knowledge transaction, we must bring the particulars of our experience into relation with universals. So, for instance, we speak of the phenomena of physics as acting in accordance with the laws of gravitation. . . . If we study the particulars of this world as they are related to one another in time as well as in space, we observe certain historical laws. But the most comprehensive interpretation that we can give of the facts by connecting the particulars and the universals that together constitute the universe leaves our knowledge at loose ends, unless we may presuppose God back of this world. . . . As Christians, we hold that in this universe we deal with a derivative one and many, which can be brought into fruitful relation with one another because, back of both, we have in God the original one and many [the Trinity]. If we are to have coherence in our experience, there must be a correspondence of our experience to the eternally coherent experience of God” (Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 58-59).

to bring creation back into right relationship with God, the very designer of coherence. This is missed in part by the noetic effects of sin (going back to the triad of metaphysics, epistemology, language). Our knowledge of who God is and how he has redeemed the cosmos through the word of his Son and the continuing work of his Spirit has yet to percolate through the tight crevices of the human mind. It takes time for a mind to heal. But we rest assured, knowing that “despite the fact that man’s knowledge is categorized by self frustration, through the power and clarity of God’s revelation in the world and in Scripture, he still knows things truly.”<sup>39</sup> And when our knowledge is renewed daily as we take on the mind of Christ, we will speak with more creaturely coherence, according to God’s standard for coherence (the perfect relation of the one and the many), not the world’s standard (a bifurcated view of the one and the many).

**Premise 4: Human speech presupposes the co-inherence of the Trinity.**

Now that we have come this far, perhaps we can take the final premises in stride. Here again, we rely on the triad of metaphysics, epistemology, and language.

Every coherent utterance is a microcosm of the Trinity, reflecting “the richness of [God’s] inner life.”<sup>40</sup> In terms of metaphysics, God is an eternal, relational being, and only a being who is eternally relational could account for meaningful relational behaviors in finite creatures.<sup>41</sup> This is because “meaningful,” which includes the notion of coherence (logical consistency and effectiveness), is a label we can only give to pieces of human behavior (in this case, the behavior of speech) within a cosmic and purposeful plan. Outside the realm of a holistic plan for every detail in the cosmos, meaning is compartmentalized, and thus incoherent, since whatever logical consistency it may have is truncated. This alone disqualifies that detail from bearing the descriptor “coherent.” Coherence is not an ideal form in the platonic sense; it is a concrete feature emanating from an unfathomable complex of connected relationships.<sup>42</sup> God is the author of coherence because his being, as tri-personal, is the author of all relations in existence and as such is the only one who could account for the possibility of coherence. But more fundamental than this is that God is three persons in one being. He communes with himself in eternity and throughout redemptive history, and it is only because God does this that his

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>40</sup> John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013), 434. On God’s speech as an essential attribute of his nature, see pp. 522-23.

<sup>41</sup> “Any harmonious functioning in relationships depends on the foundational harmony of God’s relationships among the persons of the Trinity” (Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2011], 47).

<sup>42</sup> Though I would imagine this would drive secular linguists nuts, we cannot apply the descriptor “coherent” to an isolated proposition—unless we understand that proposition to be an infinitesimal part of an unfathomably complex system that only God knows exhaustively, as if the proposition itself were a blade of grass in a bird’s nest the size of Saturn.

image bearers can do the same. Temporal relational behavior relies on God's eternal relational behavior for its meaning and coherence.

In terms of epistemology (how we attain knowledge), "comprehensive knowledge somewhere must be the basis for true knowledge anywhere."<sup>43</sup> Only God has this comprehensive knowledge, and only in the triune God of Scripture could this knowledge be centered on persons.<sup>44</sup> This has as its foundation the fact that God eternally reveals his being to himself: his perfect knowledge of who he is and what he does is eternally communicated in the Godhead.<sup>45</sup> Humans, of course, cannot bear the weight of this knowledge; they can only bear, in God's grace, a small piece of it, enough to recognize that God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is Lord and that his omniscience is the only ground for our partial and analogical knowledge.

In terms of language, we must recognize that God's speech, his pure communication from one member of the Trinity to another, is the ground for our interpersonal communication. God's interpersonal communication is based on understanding, obedience, and trust. The Son has an understanding of the Father's will, obeys that will even unto his death, and trusts that God's word will stand forever, as he does. The Son's understanding, obedience, and trust allow for continual communion within the Trinity. Just as the Father declares his understanding to the Son, so the Spirit takes what has been given to the Son and applies it to creation. Understanding runs throughout the Trinity; likewise with obedience and trust. Interpersonal communication among God's creatures also rests on understanding, obedience, and trust. When these pillars are violated, we see the ugly, corrupt potential of language: confusion (i.e., incoherence), rebellion, and deception.

Lastly, we come, yet again, to the question of effectiveness: this is the question we introduced earlier. Why is human speech effective? The short of it is, as you might have guessed, because God's speech is effective. If God's word did not always attain the purpose for which he sent it (Isa 55:10-11), then our speech would never attain the purpose we have for it. Effectiveness cannot be measured on a purely temporal scale; our behaviors are efficacious only so long as they have lasting value, and value circles back to epistemology: a knowledge of the way things truly are, a knowledge of the ultimate end of all things. The ultimate end of all things is God himself: our eternal fellowship with him or our eternal separation from him. That, ultimately, is why language is effective, because with every word we speak we are either advancing the boundary lines of

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<sup>43</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 65.

<sup>44</sup> Paul K. Moser has helpfully pointed out that knowledge of God is "person-centered" because God is a person. I take issue with several aspects of Moser's approach in his article, but I do find that his notion of "person-centered knowledge" is biblical and quite helpful, even when applied to the field of linguistics, since we worship the personal God of language. See Paul K. Moser, "Cognitive Inspiration and Knowledge of God," in *The Rationality of Theism* (ed. Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser; New York: Routledge, 2003), 67.

<sup>45</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 523.

God's kingdom or parrying Satan's attacks as we retreat. Philo of Alexandria was right, every one of us is in a great battle at this very moment, either as a rebel or a dulo-rex, that is, a servant-king of the Lord of all.<sup>46</sup> The effective word is either an assault on Satan's realm of evil, apathy, and incoherence, or a faithful use of the Trinitarian power of language for the sake of restoration and communion.

**Conclusion: Each time we speak we affirm God's existence.**

As we noted before, all human behaviors are only coherent and effective because they are analogs of divine behavior. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our speech, our verbal attempts to commune with one another and with God. Speech, as a human behavior, wonderfully reflects the necessity of the Trinity. Only in God's being, knowledge, and inter-trinitarian communication do we find solid ground for the coherence and effectiveness of human speech, which is itself an image-bearing product of our derivative being, thought, and interpersonal communication.

So the next time someone questions you about the existence of God, before you answer understand that the person has already testified to it by uttering the question. He is relying on God's being, knowledge, and inter-trinitarian speech to rebel against his creator, which, in Van Tillian terms, is like the girl climbing up on her father's lap so that she can slap him in the face.<sup>47</sup> This truth, if nothing else, adds new depth to Jas 1:19, "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak." For once words fall from your tongue, you have stepped into the divine limelight as a creature in covenantal relation to your speaking God.

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<sup>46</sup> This is a term I find helpful, since it is based on scriptural language: from the Greek, δούλος, meaning "servant," and the Latin *rex*, meaning "king." A "dulo-rex" is a regenerated image-bearer, taking on the original rule of Adam in servant form, following the pattern of Christ's kingly servitude.

<sup>47</sup> Cornelius Van Til, "Response to Herman Dooyeweerd," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), 98.