

WTJ 79 (2017): 345–64

WORLD THROUGH WORD: TOWARDS A LINGUISTIC ONTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

We should have a “linguistic ontology,” that is, our ontology should be based on God’s speech as that which created, sustains, and governs all of reality. A linguistic ontology draws our attention to the covenantal and personal nature of reality and contrasts with long-held Aristotelian categories of “substance” and “accidents.” A linguistic ontology will help us to be more faithful to the biblical witness in understanding the world in which we live, a world that has been structured and is sustained according to God’s purposes revealed to us in Scripture.

There is a silver maple tree outside my window. The lower branches have been pruned, and the scars from the saw have turned deep brown after December rain. Do you know why that tree is there—why I can walk outside into the front yard and rest my hand on the cold bark?

Yesterday as I was sitting at a stoplight, a flock of starlings rolled in the wind like a flag as I sat waiting for the light to turn green. I thought about why they carried so well together—what was it that kept them caught up in the breeze?

Then I thought of the train line that runs through the suburbs of Philadelphia and out into the countryside where we live. The people who board it in the morning moonlight and ride the rail to some two dozen stops between Colmar and center city—how do they do it? What allows them to walk the platform, smoke a cigarette, hold a conversation?

God spoke. That is the ontological grounds for all existence and the foundation of all the coherence in our experience. Every bit of the material world, from the ground beneath us to the sky above us to the bones inside us, is there because the trinitarian God “opened his holy lips.”¹ God’s word is what

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¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: A New Translation of the 1541 Edition*, trans. Robert White (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2014), 16. Note here that Calvin is referring to God’s special revelation, not to creation. The analogy, however, is fitting for creation as well, since God spoke creation into existence. In this sense, it was also necessary for God to “reopen his holy lips” when sin entered the cosmic order.

accounts for the world. Not a fiber, not a quark is held together but for his speech. The same goes for the maple tree and the starlings and the passengers riding to the Market Street Station. I *am* and you *are* because he *said*. The Father spoke through the Son by the power of the Spirit; the vibrations of divine vocal chords put vigor in our veins, and set the rest of the world turning.

God's speech accounting for all that is—for all that has been and will be—means that we must have a *linguistic ontology*. And only with the Trinity is this possible. The grounds for a linguistic ontology lie only in God's trinitarian being, and these grounds are solidified by the *covenantal* and *representational* nature of reality, which, I argue, are evident because language is communal and representational on its deepest level.² In this article, I begin by introducing what such an ontology entails, and end by suggesting implications that this would have for the *imago Dei*, the personalistic atmosphere of reality, and the weight of our words as speaking creatures of a speaking God.

I. *Language and the Being of God*

Two colossal questions must be answered at the outset, and then their answers must be related. The first: what is language? It will not do to say that language is a system of graphic and phonetic signs. Kenneth L. Pike (1912–2000) showed decades ago that language is far more than this. Language is, in his words, a behavior, an activity. More precisely, it is

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.³

Pike goes on to show that not only is "language behavior" bound up with "non-language behavior" in single events, but also that nonverbal elements of behavior can be (and often are) structurally substituted by elements of nonverbal behavior and vice versa.⁴ Language is, then, communicative behavior. It is what we might call a *communion behavior*, in the sense that its purpose is the

² By "representational," we mean that, in Van Til's terms, the persons of the Trinity are "exhaustively representational of one another," that is, each person fully indwells and interpenetrates each of the others, so God's use of language to create man requires that man be representational of the tripersonal God in all of his thoughts and behaviors. See Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, vol. 2 of *In Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 78.

³ Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*

expression of one person towards another.⁵ By its very definition, language presupposes community.

The second question: who is God? We could pour out the language of the Westminster Confession here, and we would be the wiser for it. The words of that confession are steeped in prayerful, biblical devotion, and we would be hard-pressed to find a fuller and clearer articulation of the attributes of the Godhead than what is provided in WCF 2.1–2. But the question runs deeper than God’s communicable and incommunicable attributes. Yes, God is immutable, invisible, immense, and eternal; he is wise, holy, righteous, and free. But all of these attributes are given their proper weight only in God’s trinity. We do well to take a reminder from Herman Bavinck: “It is in this holy trinity that each attribute of His being comes into its own, so to speak, gets its fullest content. It is only when we contemplate this trinity that we know who and what God is.”⁶ Elsewhere he writes, “the one name of God is only fully unfolded in that of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.”⁷

Bavinck is by no means alone here. God’s trinitarian nature, warned the great Charles Hodge, was certainly not “a mere speculative or abstract truth.... It underlies the whole plan of salvation, and determines the character of the religion (in the subjective sense of that word) of all true Christians.”⁸ But as critical as the Trinity is to our salvation and religious life, it is, at base, most important that we uphold that God’s *being* is triune. In other words,

the identity of the three distinct Persons within the one beatific Being of God indicates that God’s very Being subsists through relations. That is to say, the ontological is understood through the relational.... The one eternal LORD exists as a communion of holy love within Himself, and this means personal existence; that is, the inter-communion of three equally divine and holy Persons. For God to be is to be in relationship within Himself.⁹

The perichoretic communion of the persons of the Godhead is so strong that Van Til goes as far as to say that the Godhead is one person. If we walk gingerly

⁵ Pierce Taylor Hibbs, “Closing the Gaps: Perichoresis and the Nature of Language,” *WTJ* 78 (2016): 299–322; Pierce Taylor Hibbs, “Words for Communion,” *Modern Reformation* 25, no. 4 (July/August 2016): 5–8. Poythress also reminds us, “One of the purposes of language—in fact, a central, predominant purpose—is to be a vehicle for personal communication and communion between God and human beings” (Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009], 38). As we will see, this communion also involves the expressions of the persons of the Trinity towards one another. Before creation, these expressions, we can biblically speculate, would have been of love and glory.

⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 143.

⁷ Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 279.

⁸ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 1:442–43.

⁹ Douglas Kelly, *The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology: Grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in Light of the Church* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2008), 447.

here, we could say that just as God is both a one-conscious being and a tri-conscious being, so also he is both one person and three persons, provided we allow that “person” denotes two different things in this context.¹⁰ Van Til’s point was to show that God’s essence is not brute or impersonal. Yet, coupled with that goal was a desire never to see the incomprehensibility of the triune God reduced to a rationalistic formula—a product of univocal thought.¹¹ An implied affirmation of Van Til’s argument was that God’s tripersonal communion is the bedrock of his being. In other words, we might say that “God’s being is in communicating,” providing that we mean intra-trinitarian communication, that is, self-communication, and not extra-trinitarian, redemptive communication.¹²

¹⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 348, 363. Here the “person” of the Godhead emerges from the doctrine of perichoresis and thus guards against God’s essence being viewed as mute, impersonal, or rationalistically comprehensible; the “persons” would convey the traditional view of orthodoxy—that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Letham notes Torrance’s objection to this language. The latter suggests that a “person” is defined by relations to other persons, so this is fitting for traditional orthodox understandings of “person,” since the Father relates to the Son, who relates to the Spirit, who relates to the Father, and so on. If the Godhead itself is a person, to whom does the Godhead relate? (See Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004], 180–81). Torrance, with Letham, seems to miss Van Til’s underlying purpose, along with the fact that one word can have multiple denotations. Perhaps Van Til’s use of person here might confuse those who are not familiar with the context, but Van Til has done nothing unorthodox here. Admittedly, he would have done well to draw out this difference in denotation. Tipton articulated years ago that “Van Til’s Trinitarian formulation arises out of his apologetic concern to accentuate God’s incomprehensibility in the context of ‘univocal reasoning’” (Lane G. Tipton, “The Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility,” *WTJ* 64 [2002]: 290–91). In other words, Van Til wants us to reason analogically about God’s being, and that requires that we incorporate the teaching of perichoresis into our definition of God’s essence. He did that by linking perichoresis to both the unity and distinctions in the Godhead, and arrived at a formula that, though innovative in its language, buttressed the orthodox teaching of the Trinity and put stronger blockades before the surging tide of univocal thought.

¹¹ Tipton, “Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility,” 290-91, 293, 297, 298–99, and 301.

¹² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 245. We would not say, however, that God has his being “in act.” At least, the ontology of God is not based entirely on his action *ad extra*. It is based on who God is in himself (*ad intra*), which is faithfully but not exhaustively reflected in his works *ad extra*. In other words, we cannot take all of what God does in creation and redemption and make that essential to him, for that would tie the Creator to his creation so as to make him dependent on it. As soon as we say that God has his *being* in actions outside of himself, we have effectively collapsed the immanent Trinity—who God is apart from creation and redemption—into the economic. This not only destabilizes the being of God (God would be free to do anything, even those things contrary to his nature, e.g., commit sin or violate his covenant), it also imports into the eternal Godhead properties that belong only to the economic, redemptive work of Christ and the Spirit, thus dissolving the Creator-creature distinction. For instance, we would not say, with Moltmann, that God is a “suffering God.” Suffering is not part of *who God is* in himself; it is only something he takes upon himself voluntarily in choosing to create and then redeem humanity, along with the rest of the cosmos.

The latter concept leads to Barth's later theological ontology and its host of problems, the greatest of which is a collapse of the immanent into the economic Trinity.¹³ We can only affirm, then, that God *is in himself a perfectly unified tripersonal being*. In the language of T. F. Torrance, "the one being of God is to be understood in his interior relations as the Communion of the three divine persons with one another."¹⁴

Now we can relate the answers to our two questions. Language is communion behavior, and God *is* the self-communicating Trinity. This means that language is a properly divine behavior. It is not the sociological capital of the human race, nor is it merely a medium for divine-human relations. As Poythress reminds us, "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."¹⁵ Language, as communion behavior of the Trinity, has eternal roots.

II. *Language in Creation*

It is with this background that we must view the creation of reality as we know it. If language is communion behavior and the Trinity is the self-communicating tripersonal God, then the use of communion behavior to create the cosmos must be central to a biblical, and thus a linguistic, ontology. If it is God's speech that both specifies *what* exists and *how* it exists,¹⁶ then we must consider the centrality of language to the nature of reality as covenantal and representational. But before we get to that, we should remind ourselves of the triune God's speech in creation.

Bavinck not only noticed the obligation we have as Christians to maintain that God is *essentially* trinitarian; he also saw that creation itself could not come from any other being. In noting that Scripture reveals both an internal and an external communication for God, Bavinck may have cleared the brush for us to see the necessity of creation by the Trinity. His words are worth their own weight:

¹³ For details concerning Barth's focus on election in Christ as the basis of God's triunity, and thus his distortion (if not destruction) of a truly trinitarian ontology, see James J. Cassidy, "Election and Trinity," *WTJ* 71 (2009): 66.

¹⁴ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 136. J. B. Torrance suggests that we say God is "Being-in-Communion." See James B. Torrance, "Contemplating the Trinitarian Mystery of Christ," in *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality, Presented to James Houston*, ed. J. I. Packer and Loren Wilkinson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 141.

¹⁵ Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 18.

¹⁶ Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 105.

Scripture ... knows both emanation and creation, a twofold communication of God—one within and the other outside the divine being; one to the Son who was in the beginning with God and was himself God, and another to creatures who originated in time; one from the being and another by the will of God. The former is called generation; the latter, creation. By generation, from all eternity, the full image of God is communicated to the Son; by creation only a weak and pale image of God is communicated to the creature. Still the two are connected. Without generation creation would not be possible. If in an absolute sense God could not communicate himself to the Son, he would be even less able, in a relative sense, to communicate himself to his creature. If God were not triune, creation would not be possible.¹⁷

God's inter-trinitarian speech, in other words, is requisite for his extra-trinitarian speech. The two are linked, one serving as the archetype and the other as the ectype, for which human speech is a distant echo, an ectype of an ectype. Put differently,

God the Father expresses his character in his speech, that is, in his Son who is the Word. The constant character of God and the faithfulness of God the Father are manifested in the fact that the Word is in accordance with this character...

This original speech within the Trinity is the archetype for speech that creates the world external to God. The world is distinct from God and is a manifestation of the faithfulness and creativity of God. In this respect, the world images the fact that the Son is distinct from the Father and is a manifestation of the faithfulness of God in the creativity of the Son.¹⁸

In light of the fact that God's internal communication with the Son grounds the external communication that brought creation into being, the act of creation reveals that God is an *essentially* "relational being,"¹⁹ that is, a communicative being. Verbal manifestations from the mouth of God confirm that "communion and communication are inherent" for him.²⁰ Thus, when God exercised his divine linguistic power at the dawn of creation, that power was and is "intrinsically and undeviatingly personal within the fullness of personal Being in the Holy Trinity."²¹ Creation is thus thoroughly relational and personal because it has its origin and existence in the speech of the Trinity.

However, we find ourselves in a world that is not only relational and personal, but also covenantal and representational *because it was created through the communion behavior of the Trinity, that is, language*. In other words, all of reality is covenantal and representational because language is covenantal and representational, and this must be factored into—in fact, it must *define*—our

¹⁷ Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Friend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 39.

¹⁸ Vern S. Poythress, *Triperspectivalism and the Mystery of the Trinity* (unpublished), 117.

¹⁹ Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 428.

²¹ T. F. Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 207.

ontology. From the biblical perspective, more foundational than the traditional Aristotelian categories of “substance” and “accidents” are the covenantal and representational functions of all things within God’s plan for history. A linguistic ontology is also a divinely purposive ontology. We will discuss this in relation to Aristotle’s popular categories after establishing in what sense language is covenantal and representational.

III. *Language as Covenantal and Representational*

1. *Language as Covenantal*

Tomes have been written on the centrality of covenant for theology. But in our context the word “covenant” takes on a strikingly warmer connotation than is typical. Suzerain treaties, lords and vassals, kings and their kingdoms—that’s all well and good, but what *is* a covenant? Essentially, it is a linguistic agreement, an exchange of promises, a verbalized expression of relationship. In creation, this relationship took shape when order was drawn from chaos. God’s divine fiat established an order that he would keep. As Kline puts it, “God dictated into existence a covenantal kingdom order, and implicit in the structuring-defining words spoken by the beneficent Creator was his oath commitment to maintain by faithful providential oversight the good world he had made and given its meaning.”²² Why use what Kline calls a “covenantal kingdom order”? Because covenant presupposes relationship, and God is a relational being.

What is most important for our purposes is not merely the fact that creation is covenantal, but that this covenantal structure had to be implemented and established by language, God’s communion behavior. Covenant is a *voluntary* (on God’s part) relational structure that emerges from God’s *essential*, and hence necessary, inter-trinitarian communion. In other words, covenant is not necessary to God’s being, but communion is, and covenant can only be drawn from communion. God’s inner communication allows for his outer communication with creation, which itself came into being by his speech.

God’s communal, covenantal speech then leads us to two conclusions: (1) this speech, and its ensuing implications, “furnishes the only completely personalistic interpretation of reality”;²³ and (2) all of reality is *ontologically* bound to the covenantal community, which involves essentially two parties: God and everything else. Humans, however, are the primary party in the latter group, as image-bearing stewards of the rest of creation. Put differently, the covenantal speech of God reveals that his creation of humanity and of the cosmos was

²² Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2000), 15–16.

²³ Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 98. This is why Van Til concludes that every person has a “covenantal personality” (p. 95).

an essentially personal act that welded all of reality to the Trinity via divine communion behavior.

Because God speaks the cosmos into a covenantal relationship with himself, a linguistic ontology not only demands that reality is a product of God's speech, but also that it is covenantally bound to him. We might find this easy to understand with regards to people, since theologians have a history of discussing our covenantal obligations to our Creator. But this also applies to the rest of reality as well. Throughout Scripture, we find the language of covenant used analogically with the natural world, affirming that every speck of material is covered with an ancient and holy conversation, *through which it has come into being*. Creation responds in covenantal submission to the self-communicating God who called it out of nothing. The psalmist writes that trees clap their hands at the wonder of God (Ps 148:9), and the mountains and hills "burst into song" (Isa 55:12). Jesus responds to Pharisaic resistance to his royal reception in Jerusalem by affirming that if the disciples were mute at his coming, then "the very stones would cry out" (Luke 19:40). Here we see both praise (clapping and singing) and a witnessing to God's glorious dominion—covenantal responses. Moreover, these responses (praise and witness), we can biblically speculate, were not alien to the persons of the Godhead in eternity past. God was always in a trinitarian circle of self-love (or self-affirmation, i.e., a type of witnessing) and glorification (John 17:5). So, the covenantal dimension of reality is an echo of God's inter-trinitarian communion. Language, by its very nature, is covenantal (for us) and communal (properly and eternally for God, and analogously for his creation).

2. *Language as Representational*

Language is also *representational*, which complements the covenantal nature of God's creative speech. We must at the outset state clearly what we mean by "representational." We do not mean that language represents thoughts, though this is certainly true, nor that language represents or signifies objects, which, again, is also true. Rather, we mean to predicate something unique about language. To understand this predication, we must first clarify what Cornelius Van Til meant by saying that the trinitarian God is representational. Then we can apply this to language, since language (i.e., communion behavior) is essential to God's nature.²⁴

For Van Til, the persons of the Trinity are exhaustively *representational* of one another. What did he mean by this statement? At heart, this was nothing more than a unique expression of the ancient teaching of *perichoresis* or *circumcessio*, which affirmed that the persons of the Trinity interpenetrate and indwell one

²⁴ On speech, or in a broader sense, language, as an essential attribute of God, see John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013), 522–23.

another. Prime proof texts for this teaching include John 10:30, "I and the Father are one," John 14:9, where Jesus tells Philip that anyone who has seen him has seen the Father, and Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17. In these texts, the writer has in mind the Son and the Father, but the Spirit is also included elsewhere in John's Gospel. For example, John tells us that Christ is "the truth" (John 14:6), but he leaves for his followers "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17).

Seeing the biblical validity of this teaching, Van Til wrote that "the persons of the Trinity are mutually representational. They are *exhaustively* representational of one another."²⁵ In other words, the persons of the Godhead interpenetrate and indwell one another to such a degree that when one of these persons is in focus, the other two are exhaustively represented as well.²⁶ This does not blur the personal distinctions among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; it merely accents their intimacy and the equal ultimacy of unity and diversity in the Godhead.²⁷

Van Til then linked this representational feature of the Godhead to humanity. If the persons of the Godhead are exhaustively representational of one another, and if the triune God created us after his own "image and likeness," then our every thought and action must be representative of the tripersonal God. Put differently, "because he is a creature, man must, in his thinking, his feeling and his willing, be representative of God. There is no other way open for him. He could, in the nature of the case, think nothing at all unless he thought God's thoughts after him, and this is representational thinking."²⁸ Yet, our "representational" behavior goes beyond our thinking. It extends to the whole personality.

The foundation of all personal activity among men must be based upon the personality of one ultimate person, namely, the person of God, if only it be understood that this ultimate personality of God is a triune personality. In the Trinity there is completely personal relationship without residue. And for that reason it may be said that man's actions are all personal too. Man's surroundings are shot through with personality because all things are related to the infinitely personal God. But when we have said that the surroundings of man are really completely personalized, we have also established the fact of the representational principle. All of man's acts must be representational of the acts of God.²⁹

²⁵ Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 78. He restates this several pages later: "The foundation of the representative principle among men is the fact that the Trinity exists in the form of a mutually exhaustive representation of the three Persons that constitute it" (p. 96).

²⁶ In Torrance's words, "in the Holy Trinity the Father is not properly Father apart from the Son and the Spirit, and the Son is not properly Son apart from the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is not properly Spirit apart from the Father and the Son" (T. F. Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 206).

²⁷ Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 96.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 78–79.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

In sum, because the persons of the Godhead are exhaustively representational of one another, creatures made in the image of the Trinity are analogically representational of God in all that they do.

Language, then, must also be representational. By this we mean that all of our communicative behavior represents on a finite, analogical scale the communicative behavior of the Trinity. In their communicative behavior, the persons of the Trinity exhaustively represent one another; in our communicative behavior, we image the Trinity by analogically representing ourselves. Perhaps it is for this reason that we see Scripture constantly identifying a *person* with his or her *words*, both communally and individually. The human race was a unified whole prior to Gen 11, when “the whole earth had one language and the same words.” The diffusion of language brought about not just confusion, but the separation of people groups (Gen 11:8). Ever since that time, people groups have been identified primarily by their native language, or at least their dialect. Hence, Peter stuck out like a sore thumb among the scribes and elders of Jerusalem because his speech was phonetically unique; he was a Galilean (Matt 23:73), and spoke as one. Every utterance marked him as a member of a specific geographic community.

Our words also represent us individually, ultimately because the Word of the Father is the “exact imprint of his nature” (Heb 1:3). The Father is perfectly represented by the Son, who is the Word. Because we are creatures made in the image of the trinitarian God, our words are fitting representations of who we are. Just as God’s Word reveals his personal presence, so our words express our personality, and in that sense we are present with our words.³⁰ Because we ourselves are present with our words, there is a sense in which our words are inextricably bound up with our person. For this reason, the psalmist writes, “Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit” (Ps 34:13). *People* commit evil acts; *people* are deceptive, but our words are so deeply rooted in our personhood that the psalmist can exhort our tongues and lips as if they were *us*. Indeed, we can certainly assume this much if Christ himself says, “by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt 12:37). Language determines our destination as people.

Language, then, is representational of both communities and individual persons. However, language is also representational in another sense, probably more in line with what Van Til might have considered. Language is representational in the sense that we should represent the trinitarian God in our use of words to love and honor others. For all eternity, God comprises his own linguistic community of self-love and glorification.³¹ While we are not called

³⁰ “Man’s speech shows meaning, control, and presence. In this respect it images the meaning, control, and presence of God’s speech” (Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 30). See also John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010), ch. 11.

³¹ “The divine essence is only divine when hypostasized in three Persons, because these three have a value and a relationship between Them that deserves and is capable of absolute

to glorify others with our words, we are called to build one another up and encourage one another (1 Thess 5:11). This is related to glorification in that it is an uplifting behavior. When we encourage someone, we lift that person up so that he or she understands how much he or she is loved.

We could end this section with Van Til's words, "One either maintains that human personal thought and action is representative, covenantal thought and action, because man is enveloped at every point by the claims of God; or, one, in effect, maintains that human personal thought and action is autonomous."³² However, more needs to be said about the implications of language as a representational behavior.

First, language is far more than a system of signification—a variegation of phonemes and graphemes that point to reality. With Pike, we would affirm that language is communicative behavior, but, fundamentally, it is also an "imaging behavior": it marks us as creatures of the God who speaks *with himself*, and also with his creatures. We might even say that language, more than any other personal behavior, brands our souls with God's image. But it does not stop there. Language is central to the being of God as one who communes with himself—the Father with the Son, the Son with the Spirit, and the Spirit with the Father.³³ Think of it this way: if it is true, as Scripture suggests, that "language originates with God, not with man," and that God in his tripersonality is essentially a communicating being, then language is not merely one among many aspects of our representational activity.³⁴ It is, at heart, the representational activity that shimmers with the eternal glory of God's trinitarian being. Language is not merely, in Samuel Johnson's words, "the dress of thought." It is the ontological basis of reality, since God not only spoke reality into being, but also has his being in personal self-communion.

Here is where John Zizioulas's work is so helpful. Greek and Roman usage of the word "person" (*prosopon* and *persona*, respectively) had been detached from substance, from ontology, until the time of nascent Christianity, when the early church struggled to articulate how God could be both three and one. The Greek writer Hippolytus was perhaps the first to take a Greek word formerly used with reference to substance, *hypostasis*, and identify it with *prosopon*, in what

love" (Dumitru Staniloae, *The Holy Trinity: In the Beginning There Was Love*, trans. Roland Clark [Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012], 17). He later writes, "The highest form of love is revealed to us in the unending love between the one and only Father of a unique Son. Yet throughout eternity the love between the Father and the Son has also been directed toward a third Person who takes joy in the love that each has for the other" (p. 55).

³² Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 78.

³³ "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?" (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, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004], 183).

³⁴ Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 28.

Zizioulas describes as a “revolutionary” development.³⁵ Based on this development and its ensuing ontological implications, Zizioulas concludes that an ontology was born not in the line of Platonic or Aristotelian metaphysics, but in the line of the triune being of God. This new, trinitarian ontology meant that,

for someone *to be* and *to be in relation* becomes identical. For someone or something to *be*, two things are simultaneously needed: being itself (*hypostasis*) and *being in relation* (i.e., being a person). It is only in relationship that identity appears as having an ontological significance, and if any relationship did not imply such an ontologically meaningful identity, then it would be no relationship. Here is certainly an ontology derived from the being of God.³⁶

Such an ontology can be further refined. What else is central to communion, to relationship, but communicative behavior, that is, language? Creation presupposes communion, and communion presupposes language. Thus, our view of God’s being demands that language be taken as the basis of ontology, not a component of it. Language is not a tree on the landscape of creation; it is what brought the landscape into being and what holds it together. This gives a whole new meaning to John 1:1 and Heb 1:3. “In the beginning was the Word,” that is, “in the beginning was *the One who could talk!* Not just a set of rays of energy ready for a big bang; not a pantheistic sum of non-focused non-personal elements; not a vague spirit of impersonal goodness; but the Personal-One-with-Language.”³⁷ This “Personal-One-with-Language” is the same who “upholds the universe by the word of his power.” Language always *was* in God, and it was this speaking, self-communing Trinity who spoke in order to bring about and sustain reality. This, surely, warrants a *linguistic ontology*.

Second, and following from the first point, the representational nature of language sheds light on the nature of sin. In the hearts of all people lies a deadly desideratum: a yearning to be self-governing and independent, in a word, autonomous. While language is a communing behavior, sin is an isolating behavior. The root of sin, as reflected in Van Til’s own statement, is autonomy. Sin is an isolationist movement. It separates us from the tripersonal God in whom we have our being. Thus, all of the current malformation and corruption of language is, at root, related to our sinful desire for self-government. Just as Adam and Eve chose to act on their own, trusting in the *non-representational*, counterfeit language of the serpent, so we constantly try to act outside the model of linguistic love and encouragement rooted in the Trinity. We abuse, misuse, and ignore the weight of words not merely because we are careless or uninformed or limited in our understanding of an idea, but because we have followed the words of another. We have, like our forebears, taken the

³⁵ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 39.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

³⁷ Kenneth L. Pike, “Morals and Metaphor,” *Interchange* 12 (1972): 231.

serpent's words—words that led to mistrust and estrangement between man and God—and set ourselves in ethical hostility towards the God who chose to speak us into fellowship with himself.

But our ethical hostility could not, and cannot, disrupt or dissolve our metaphysical bond with the self-communing Trinity.³⁸ We are creatures bound to speak, both to God and to one another. We have gone on doing so for millennia without turning back in faithfulness to the one whose words gave us our being. We tread upon the world of the Word while we spit in the face of the speaker. How painfully poetic it is, then, that our restoration could only come from God speaking again, through the person of his Son (Heb 1:2).

IV. *Covenant and Representation over Substance and Accidents*

We have seen that language is covenantal and representational, and because the trinitarian God used language to create all of reality, everything visible and invisible is also covenantal and representational. This summarizes what we called a linguistic ontology. Far from being novel, it is thoroughly biblical, taken directly from the pages of Scripture. However, if we grant it any novelty, perhaps it lies in the rejection of *being* as an abstraction, instead defining being only as it relates to God's linguistically revealed, personal purpose. A linguistic ontology, then, is also a purposive ontology. In other words, everything in reality has its being in covenantal and representational relation to the purposes of the Trinity. There is no such thing as "bare being."

Admittedly, this flies in the face of centuries of philosophical assumptions based on Aristotelian metaphysics. Frederick Copleston notes that Aristotle's *Metaphysics* "has had a tremendous influence on the subsequent thought of Europe,"³⁹ and Aristotle's understanding of being is also what undergirds most current conceptions of logic.⁴⁰ The problem, however, is that Aristotelian metaphysics and logic are based on an impersonal view of reality, rejecting the triune God of Scripture and the covenantal and representational nature of reality.⁴¹ This not only opposes a linguistic ontology, but also invalidates itself, for what can we truly predicate of being without presupposing a foundation of

³⁸ As Van Til noted, our ethical hostility toward God cannot erase our metaphysical dependence upon and imaging of him. "Because man is a creature of God, it is impossible that he should ever be alienated from God metaphysically. He can never actually become the independent being that he thinks he is. Even the king's heart is in the hand of God as the watercourses" (Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 197).

³⁹ Frederick Copleston, *Greece and Rome: From the Pre-Socratics to Plotinus*, vol. 1 of *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Image Books, 1946), 287.

⁴⁰ Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 28.

⁴¹ "Philosophy in most of its forms, from the time of Aristotle, clings to the foundational conception that logic is impersonal, and that certain modes of valid reasoning can be construed as mechanistic forms independent of the language of God" (*ibid.*, 82).

eternal, divine purpose? In other words, how could we possibly be satisfied with saying *what* and *how* something is without saying *why* it is in relation to God's redemptive plan?⁴²

To review Aristotle's ontology, we need only remind ourselves that Aristotle, like his predecessors, was concerned with metaphysics as a self-contained science. "Metaphysical science is concerned with being as such [and] is the study of being *qua* being."⁴³ His goal was to study unchangeable *substances*, for everything in reality is either a substance or "an affection" or "accident" of a substance.⁴⁴ In other words, a substance is the essential identifying marker that makes a thing what it is, whereas an accident is an additional property of a thing, which can be removed without altering the identity. A mug, for example, in terms of its substance, is a container for liquid; that is its essence. But it can have many accidental features: it can be blue, red, tall, short, wide, or narrow, and so on. The study of being, then, was a matter of boiling down features of reality to substance and accidents.

We would first take issue with the impersonal nature of Aristotle's endeavor. The study of being *qua* being, in the form of substance and accidents, is utterly impersonal. We have already concurred with Van Til that "man's surroundings are shot through with personality because all things are related to the infinitely personal God." So, leaving the tripersonal God out of the study of being would prove detrimental; breaking down components of the world into substances and accidents will not tell us the true nature of reality.

However, Aristotle's categories of substance and accidents have a far more troubling problem. To define being without reference to God's ultimate divine purpose is, in effect, to walk away in the middle of a conversation. What is being without God's ultimate purpose? What is a substance or an accident without reference to God's comprehensive plan for all of reality? Consider the mug. We cannot restrict ourselves to defining the substance of a mug because a mug does not exist in isolation from the rest of reality. There is no such thing as pure, self-contained "mugness." A mug holds a liquid; a person holds a mug and probably purchased the coffee grounds that comprise the liquid; coffee is grown on plantations, which produce plants from the ground; the ground is

⁴² Note here that Aristotle, and Plato before him, was not ignorant of purposiveness (or teleology) in his substance/accidents or form/matter distinction. Frame reminds us, "For Aristotle, the combination of form and matter in individual things injects an element of purposiveness or teleology into everything. Form is what each thing is, but it is also the purpose of the thing: for Aristotle, the nature and purpose of a thing are the same. So the form of bread defines it as food, a statue as art. Recall that for Plato, too, purpose and essence were closely related: everything partook of Goodness and therefore was good for something. So form is not just what things are; it is also what they should be, what they strive to be. Form is a normative category as well as a descriptive one" (John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2015], 71). For one of the many references to purposiveness or teleology in relation to substances, see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2016), 152.

⁴³ Copleston, *Greece and Rome*, 290.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 291.

also where clay is found, which was baked at a high temperature to solidify the shape of the mug. Everything is connected. But even more important than this web of functional connections is the purpose, the ultimate goal, toward which those functions are pointing. The mug holds liquid that provides nutrients and energy for the person drinking from it, but what is that person doing? He or she is connected to a complex web of purposes each day, and those purposes are futile and meaningless if opposed to the trinitarian God and his ultimate purpose for all of reality. Thus, when Van Til says “a fact *is* its function,”⁴⁵ he is saying that things *are* not what they are abstractly. They are ontologically defined in terms of their function in God’s creative and redemptive speech.

The element of “speech” is critical here, for Aristotle does try to posit the existence of a god. He traces all of being back to an ultimate “unmoved mover,”⁴⁶ but what can such an entity reveal about the purpose of reality apart from communicative behavior? Such a being is mute and is posited merely to avoid an infinite regression. Any substance or accident understood in relation to such a being would be floating in an ultimately irrational and functionally stunted environment. If we wish to understand being, we must account for divine purpose, and we cannot account for divine purpose aside from the verbal revelation of the trinitarian God.

A linguistic ontology, then, as a divinely purposive ontology, fills the holes left by an impersonal Aristotelian metaphysic, and it does so by accounting for the personal nature of reality in relation to the speech of the Trinity. Only with this ontology can we truly arrive at a sound, biblical understanding of being, and of the purpose for being.

V. Conclusion: Implications of a Linguistic Ontology

Because a linguistic ontology has not yet been introduced in these terms,⁴⁷ it will undoubtedly face resistance in the broader philosophical (and even within the Christian philosophical) community. So we might brace for that resistance with a few comments. I restrict myself to discussing four implications: (1) the mystery of the Trinity; (2) language and the *imago Dei*; (3) the personalistic atmosphere of reality; and (4) the weight of our words.

1. The Mystery of the Trinity

One might say that a single page in Van Til’s *Introduction to Systematic Theology* started a windstorm in trinitarian debates. He wrote,

⁴⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 115.

⁴⁶ Copleston, *Greece and Rome*, 291.

⁴⁷ Vern Poythress has laid the groundwork for this approach with *In the Beginning Was the Word*, and he discusses language as a perspective on the world in chs. 9 and 10 of *Redeeming Philosophy*, and chs. 18 and 19 of *Triperspectivalism and the Mystery of the Trinity*.

It is sometimes asserted that we can prove to men that we are not asserting anything that they ought to consider irrational, inasmuch as we say that God is one in essence and three in person. We therefore claim that we have not asserted unity and trinity of exactly the same thing.

Yet this is not the whole truth of the matter. We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person.⁴⁸

He goes on to say that (1) “this is a mystery that is beyond our comprehension,” and (2) that God is one “in whom unity and ... plurality are equally ultimate.”⁴⁹ Van Til’s purpose in setting out such a description of the Godhead was to protect God’s incomprehensibility.⁵⁰ He was not denying the creedal statement, “one essence, three persons.” He was merely showing that we have, for nearly two millennia, assumed that we can exhaustively understand what this statement means. To put it bluntly, Van Til may have been suggesting that the uncritical acceptance of Aristotelian categories has led us to a univocal approach to the triune God, rather than an analogical one. Too many theologians have uttered the creedal formula without a wink, drawing the sap from a doctrine that should be steeped in mystery, awe, and adoration.

A linguistic ontology avoids this problem by restating the personal and ultimately mysterious nature of being, for all of reality is rooted in the speech of the Trinity, the one in whom unity and plurality are equally ultimate—the one in whom “one essence” carries just as much weight as “three persons.” If we follow Van Til and are consistently analogical in our approach to reality, then we can more earnestly guard ourselves against the slinking serpent of univocism, once again proclaiming that we can never exhaustively (univocally) or rationalistically comprehend the Trinity. And following this course, we must also affirm that our linguistic world has a depth no one can fathom. A linguistic ontology shows that, whether we like it or not, the Lord of reality is beyond human comprehension, and we are made in his linguistic image. This leads us to the next implication.

2. *Language and the imago Dei*

In light of a linguistic ontology, it is high time that the Christian community give language its rightful place not merely as part of the *imago Dei*, but as the center of it. Language is definitive for who we are as creatures of the self-communing trinitarian God. It is not an addendum to the classical categories of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, nor is it an afterthought to man’s reflection of God in his societal and familial relations. All of these things presuppose the centrality of language, of communion behavior. We cannot receive or pass along knowledge apart from communion behavior, whether that be

⁴⁸ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 363.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 364–65.

⁵⁰ Tipton, “Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility,” 290–91, 295, 298–99.

God's communion behavior toward us as revealed in Scripture or our expression and application of the truth of Scripture for others around us. Similarly, we cannot partake of the righteousness conferred upon us in Christ without using language to commune with other image bearers in self-sacrifice and love, thus showing we are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation of the triune God (Exod 19:6). Our societal and familial relations, as well, require the centrality of communion behavior. We commune with others in society and with our own family members through language after the fashion of the self-communing Trinity, in an analogical and creaturely sense.

With language central to the *imago Dei*, perhaps the Reformed tradition, along with the rest of Christendom, will begin to focus on the importance of our view of language not just for apologetics or biblical studies or systematic theology, but for our entire theological system. Language is at the root of theology, and it must receive extensive treatment if we are to live with Christian integrity in a world that has pawned language off as a biological-evolutionary development of the human species. The further the world gets from understanding the centrality of language not just to humanity, but to God and to the entire created realm, the more lost they will be in the glass-bead games of philosophers and theologians who use the very trinitarian behavior that marks us as image bearers to turn the gospel into mere information, rather than to reveal to the world the personal, life-changing message that it is.

3. *The Personalistic Atmosphere of Reality*

Given that every part of our personality is meant to be representational of the ultimate tripersonality of God, all of human behavior must be seen as occurring in a thoroughly personalistic atmosphere. In other words, there is no part of reality, by virtue of its spoken and sustained relation to the trinitarian God, which is not personal in the deepest sense. In Van Til's language,

If the Persons of the Trinity are representationally exhaustive of one another, human thought is cast on representational lines too. There would in that case be no other than a completely personalistic atmosphere in which human personality could function. Accordingly, when man faced any fact whatsoever, he would *ipso facto* be face to face with God. It is metaphysically as well as religiously true that man must live and cannot but live *coram deo* always.... A finite personality could function in none other than a completely personalistic atmosphere, and such an atmosphere can be supplied to him only if his existence depends entirely upon the exhaustive personality of God.⁵¹

Van Til's words seem hyperbolic, but we should expect nothing less if we have a linguistic ontology. If all of reality was spoken by the tripersonal God, what else

⁵¹ Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 97.

could it be but thoroughly personal? Following in Van Til's line of conjecture, if a single quark of the cosmos were impersonal, that would be enough to suggest that God did not speak creation into being. It is all or nothing. Either God spoke and everything is permeated by its meaningful relation to God's personal plan, or else God did not speak and nothing holds anything more than a fleeting and illusory relation to anything else.

This means that we must, as Pike did, factor persons into our view of language and the rest of reality. Pike was bent on reserving a place in his theory of language for persons, persons who make choices as to how they will see and describe the world.⁵² He warned that "an attempted philosophical deletion of mind and of free observer choice may lead to an 'unlivable' life."⁵³ Or, at the least, it would lead to a life lived in a lie. And this is precisely where a linguistic ontology is so crucial. If it is true that "a person does not live in an abstraction away from things or from other people,"⁵⁴ then it is equally true that all theories and disciplines must cater to the place of the individual in the knowing process. But this does not lead to relativism. The ultimate "person" of the Trinity is the one to whom all things are intimately related and by whom all things are known and defined. Nothing exists in isolation from God. How then, more precisely, can we articulate the connection of all things to the mind of God? In what sense, exactly, do all things exist only in relation to his mind and plan? If we hold to a linguistic ontology, the answer to these questions is that God knows and defines reality as a product of his own speech. All things are tied to the mind of God, and so we cannot know things truly but for God's speech to us. What a beautiful circle of language! God as the ultimate and absolute tripersonality speaks to us as derivative, speaking creatures. All of our knowledge of reality, then, depends upon this God's communication to us. A linguistic ontology is thus also bound up with a revelational epistemology.

Given that God's personal speech accounts for both reality itself and for our true but limited knowledge of reality, we must factor people into every theory and every academic discipline if we are to form a truly biblical and trinitarian approach to whatever is under consideration. But there will be much resistance to this procedure because people are mysterious and ultimately incomprehensible. As Kallistos Ware wrote, "The human being is made in God's image and likeness; since God is beyond understanding, his icon within

⁵² This comes out even in his definition of language: "Language is not merely a set of unrelated sounds, clauses, rules, and meanings; it is a total coherent system of these integrating with each other, and with behavior, context, universe of discourse, and observer perspectives" (Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982], 44).

⁵³ Kenneth L. Pike, "Person beyond Logic, in Language, Life, and Philosophy," in *The Eighteenth LACUS Forum 1991*, ed. Ruth M. Brend (Lake Bluff, IL: Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States, 1992), 23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

humanity is also incomprehensible.”⁵⁵ But, given the exhaustively personalistic atmosphere in which we find ourselves, this applies to more than just humans; it applies to all of creation! Van Til’s words to his students have yet to make ripples on the pond of Protestantism: “We certainly cannot penetrate intellectually the mystery of the Trinity, but neither can we penetrate anything else intellectually because all other things depend on the mystery of the Trinity, and therefore all other things have exactly as much mystery in them as does the Trinity.”⁵⁶ That is a striking claim, but true. If the trinitarian God spoke reality into being, then we cannot assume that this reality is exhaustively knowable, for then the mind of God would be exhaustively knowable. We must factor into our explanation and exploration of any topic the tripersonal God of the Bible and his personal, linguistic revelation of himself in all of creation. And we must factor in God’s image-bearers at the start of any academic or popular investigation.

4. *The Weight of Words*

The final implication of a linguistic ontology is helping us to understand how weighty our words can be. It has become a mark of theological piety to refer to the weakness of words—to speak of them as nothing more than signifiers of deeper, inexpressible truths. Samuel Johnson, the great poet and playwright, wrote, “I am not yet so lost in lexicography, as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven. Language is only the instrument of science, and words are but the signs of ideas.” Language, he quipped, was nothing more than “the dress of thought.”

Let me be the first to say, yes, the way in which we often use words *suggests* they are little more than scant dressings for what really matters: objects, ideas, feelings, and emotions. All too often, words seem referentially specious and expressively anemic; they arbitrarily and imprecisely signify reality, and they are void of power because they are used by creatures who lack the foresight, determination, and aptitude (spiritual and intellectual) to see them through.

But let me also be the first to say, no. When God spoke us into existence, reflections of his communion nature were left in our blood. We communicate with power and beauty because God speaks. We have no choice in the matter. We are creatures who must be taken at our words, just as the trinitarian God asked that we take him at his word, both in creation and in redemption. Put differently, we take God at his word because he took us at his Word. But we also take each other at our words because the trinitarian God spoke us *through* words.

I say, enough with false theological piety. It too often functions as a guise for our lazy and haphazard use of language. We are communicative beings!

⁵⁵ See Kallistos Ware, foreword to *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*, by Panayiotis Nellas, trans. Norman Russell (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 9, quoted in Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 460.

⁵⁶ Cornelius Van Til, “Christ and Human Thought: Modern Theology, Part 1” (lecture, Westminster Theological Seminary, n.d.).

Language is what we do. Christians, above all others, should be the most careful, the most precise, the most cogent, the most eloquent communicators in the world. This does not demand that every Christian be a poet or novelist or renowned speaker. It simply means that we are called to think deeply about our communication.

I have little doubt that a linguistic ontology will be mocked by some, and ignored as intellectual child's play by many. But there is little we can do in the face of such a truth but praise the trinitarian God, who chose the simple things of the world to shame the wise. It may be that in making and sustaining the world through the Word, God is doing far more than exercising his power. He is calling us to see all of life through language.