Words of Counsel – Part 1: A Biblical-Theological Foundation

by PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS ─────────────────────────

As readers of Scripture, we are carried by God's words. God meets us in the valley of our suffering, in the deathtrap of our sins, and speaks words that bear us up. His words minister to us in our weakness, and they bolster our hearts with their strength.

Let me give two simple examples of the impact Scripture has on the soul. First, Psalm 131:1–2 speaks to feeling anxious:

> O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, *like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me* [emphasis added].

Here is true peace. In the midst of anxiety, you pause with David. You situate your soul before the Lord of creation, and you dwell on the image of a small child, breath barely audible, fast asleep on its mother's lap. The peace evoked by this image reflects the peace we feel when God cares for our souls in moments of turmoil. At our weakest, God's words enter our hearts, and he consoles us.

Second, consider how God's words in Psalm 3 are waiting and ready when we need deliverance.

> Arise, O LORD! Save me, O my God! *For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.* (Ps 3:7; emphasis added)

Breaking teeth—now there's a powerful image. God assures us that nothing will stand in the way of his justice, certainly not the rebellious mouths of those who disregard him and cause others pain. As sure as God shows mercy to the needy and vulnerable, the wicked will receive their due.

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Throughout Scripture we meet instructive words that move us, inspire us, convict us, and console us. And why shouldn't God's words have such power? After all, the Bible retains "God's own truthfulness, righteousness, and purity."[1] God is the most effective communicator of all time, and so, by its very nature, Scripture shapes and guides us according to God's purposes. It does this in a way unlike any other written document because all of God's words are divine. Not only are they always true, but they always achieve the purpose for which they were spoken or written. God reminds Isaiah of this with a powerful simile:

> As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10–11)

God's words are like drops of rain. He will not let them fall without bringing his plan to fruition. They are always effective, more effective than any words his creatures can produce.

And yet, though Scripture contains the most effective words in history, this doesn't mean that other words aren't also effective. We read godly words outside of Scripture, and they strike us too, don't they? They work on us, changing our perspective, drawing out emotions, revealing truth, and influencing our actions. Take, for example, these words of John Piper:

> For many, Christianity has become the grinding out of general doctrinal laws from collections of biblical facts. But childlike wonder and awe have died. The scenery and poetry and music of the majesty of God have dried up like a forgotten peach at the back of the refrigerator.[2]

Note how the images complement the message. We turn wonder into stale generalities. We push God's majesty to the back of the refrigerator and forget about it like an old peach. A concrete, everyday object helps us understand a weighty, biblical concept. Again, we are moved, shaped, and provoked by written words.

In God's grace, the power of words also extends to the secular realm. Those who do not follow Christ are often gifted in expressing their thoughts artistically and effectively. George Orwell, for example, shows his mastery of language when he describes living among the poor and homeless of northern England during the early 1930s. He traveled from hostel to hostel with this down-and-out crowd, drawing on his experiences with them for many of his later essays and novels. Here is one example of how Orwell describes his peers crowding around one of these hostels:

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[1]   Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 28.
[2]   John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 25th anniversary ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2011), 100.

> Littered on the grass, we seemed dingy, urban riff-raff. We defiled the scene, like sardine-tins and paper bags on the seashore.[3]

"Sardine-tins and paper bags" paints a picture of the homeless as social trash on the landscape of the city. His portrayal evokes sympathy in even the hardest heart, showing us how words can turn over the embers of our souls. After reading his description, who could ever look at a homeless person the same way again?

It's clear that we are moved and shaped by words, whether they come from Scripture, another Christian, or someone outside the Christian faith. And if we're made in the image of a God who speaks, then it makes sense that we would want our own words to move and shape others. But how can we do this? How can we effectively move others with our words? Specifically, as pastors and counselors, how can we use written words so that our writing becomes a form of ministry, a form of counseling?

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To answer these questions we must understand how language is used in Scripture—both positively and negatively. Once we have this foundation, we can explore how to become effective counselors through writing. My goal in the following pages is to build that foundation. We will examine Genesis 1–3 to learn about how words can be used either to guide and inspire readers, or to misguide and harm them. Then we'll consider briefly how Christ redeems language in the areas we discuss. In Part II of the article (forthcoming in *JBC* 27:3), we will look at practical ways we can empower prose so that it guides and inspires our readers.

The Trinity as Our Starting Point

Behind all of the uses of words revealed in the Bible is the God who holds communication together: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God not only speaks to us; he speaks to himself. The members of the Trinity are in a language community amongst themselves.[4]

Perhaps the most profound characteristic of this language community is that each member of the Trinity plays a special role in communicating. "God the Father is speaker, God the Son is the speech, and God the Spirit is the breath carrying the

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[3]   George Orwell, "The Spike," in *George Orwell: Essays* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2002), 8.
[4]   Vern Sheridan Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 18. Poythress points to John 16:13–15; 17 as texts illustrating this truth.

speech to its destination."[5] A perusal of Genesis 1 and John 1 brings this to light. The Father is the speaker who creates all things. The Son is the Word that the Father speaks to accomplish his purpose. The Spirit is the breath, which allows the word to be produced, carrying the message to the listener. By creational design, the hearers—you and I—then live by that breath. This helps us understand Moses' reproof when God's people complained in the desert: "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut 8:3). We were created by God's words, and we are meant to live by them.

However, we struggle to live by God's words and to use them in a way that reflects him. Our words must often be tested by others for the truth they contain (Gen 42:16; Job 12:11). We tend to speak and write empty words (Ps 41:5–7), using them deceitfully to harm others (Ps 55:21). And we must constantly be reminded to let no corrupting talk come out of our mouths—or find its way into print—but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear and to those who read (Eph 4:29). How different we are from the God of the Bible whose words are true, faithful, and uplifting.

What Words Do

What then can we learn from the Bible about how to use our words so that we reflect God and give grace to those who hear and read them? Genesis 1–3 provides a foundation for answering this question. Here we learn one foundational truth: words have power. Words have power to create, shape, and do good; words have power to destroy, distort, and do evil. This power is exhibited in five ways:

1. Words foster *communion* (and they disrupt communion).
2. Words *name* what we see around us (and they 'misname' what we see).
3. Words *evaluate,* judging good and evil (and they evaluate falsely).
4. Words *promise* (and they make false promises).
5. Words *direct*, telling us what to do and not to do (and they misdirect).

First we will consider the foundational power of words to create, shape, and do good, and then we will discuss each of the five ways in which this power is expressed.

The opening verses of Genesis demonstrate the creative and shaping *power* of language. God's "Let there be" created all that is. Once creation came into existence, God used words to move and shape what he had made. In God's creating and shaping, we witness the power of words. His words made something from nothing; they brought the sky, seas, and land out of restless chaos, and in doing so they manifested what is "good."

Yet Genesis 3 also shows words being used for evil. The serpent uses the power of language to pervert and overthrow what God had created and shaped. He muddles

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[5]   Ibid., 21.

and confuses the words of instruction that God delivered to Adam and Eve, beginning with a question. "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" Notice how the serpent alters God's words to focus on the negative, opposing God's emphasis on the positive. God said, "You may surely eat of *every* tree of the garden . . ." while the serpent says, "You shall not eat of *any* tree in the garden." God's language accented all that they *were* permitted to do; the serpent drew their attention to what they were *not* permitted to do. By fixating on a negative, he attempts to distort God's good creation in the eyes of Adam and Eve. And they listened to him. So, language has *power* not only to create and shape, but also to distort and destroy. This power of words is revealed in five ways—each of which is present every day in our speaking and writing.

1. Words foster communion. God uses language to *commune* with his creatures. Language links two or more persons together; it allows the exchange of wishes, desires, ideas, and emotions. It creates relationships. We see this even before human beings were created: "Then God said, 'Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness.'" [6] God communed and communicated with himself before humans existed. After creating humans, he began to speak to them to transfer his ideas, wishes, and desires to them (Gen 1:28–30). He told them about their purpose, where they could find food, and what their position was in relation to the rest of creation. Such things can only be understood when two or more people engage in a meaningful transaction of thoughts and emotions with the goal of deepening their understanding of each other. Of course, God already has the deepest understanding of us as his creatures, but he graciously reveals himself to us so that we can have a deeper understanding of him. In human relationships, language enables us to strive for mutual understanding of one another. So, God has instilled *communion* in communication, so that language nurtures both our relationship with him and with each other.

But every coin has two sides. Just as the power of words can be used to draw people closer together, that power can also be used to separate them. Language can cause disunion. This was the serpent's intent. To draw Eve into doubt, to set Adam and Eve against God and each other, he twisted and contorted God's message. He used words to break apart what had been joined together. The communion, the relational unity, of God's kingdom in the Garden of Eden was broken with words.[7]

Adam and Eve imitated the serpent's example. Rather than use words to commune with each other, they began shifting blame and making excuses.

"The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree,

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[6]   Gen 1:27; emphasis added. The verb form employed here (the cohortative) is often used to encourage others to act. God is communing with and encouraging himself to create the very first human.

[7]   In the garden of Gethsemane, God's kingdom would be restored through words, more specifically, through *the* Word, Jesus Christ, who chose to follow God's words above those of men.

and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you
have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (Gen
3:12–13).

In shifting blame and trading accusations, they widened the gap already growing
between themselves and God. This blame shifting exacerbates the effects of sin by
suggesting we can deny our own culpability. This is what Adam and Eve did. Rather
than examining their own hearts, they pointed an accusatory finger at someone else.

Just as the power of words can be used to draw people closer together, that power can also be used to separate them.

Adam and Eve's denial of responsibility would never have come about had they
trusted God's words. Instead, they broke communion with him in order to commune
with a creature claiming to be a higher authority. Adam should not have eaten until
he knew it was in accordance with God's command, and Eve should never have
trusted a creature's words over those of her creator. In failing to make God's words
a priority, and by believing the serpent's words instead, Adam and Eve experienced
the power of language to tear apart what God had brought together. The distance
between them and God is expressed even in physical space: they hid from God's
presence when they heard him walking in the garden (Gen 3:8). If they were truly in
communion with God, they would have run to meet him. Instead they hid behind
the trees. Just as language can foster communion—a joining together—it can also
rupture relationships and push people away from one another.

This continues today. Whenever we choose to follow someone else's words over
God's, we break communion with him. We break communion with the only one we
can trust, and shortly thereafter we point an accusatory finger at someone else. A case
in point: God says to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15), and so we confront a family
member and say, "Why do you have so much trouble thinking about someone other
than yourself?!" What happened to "in love"? "But they deserved it," we say. "They
won't learn any other way." Enter disunion and blame shifting. We break communion
with God in choosing our own words over his, and we introduce a separation
abhorrent to the God of love, the God who *died* for us because we "wouldn't learn
any other way."

2. Words name what we see around us. God uses language to *name*. After
speaking light into existence, he named it *day*, and then proceeded to separate it from
darkness (another element of shaping creation with the *power* of his word). Naming is

a means of identification, but it goes deeper than this. "There is a connection between a name and its bearer, and that connection, so far from being arbitrary, is rooted in that bearer."[8]

More than a string of phonemes, a name is tied in a special way to the one who holds it. Names identify us, and they also tell others how they should interact with us. We truly are creatures made in the image of a relational God. He lets us share in the power of names by letting us hold them, but also by letting us *give* them. God allows Adam to name the animals in accordance with their nature (Gen 2:20). This

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is analogous to the way in which God named the light, the expanse, and the seas. Adam gave a sound to the things he saw; he marked them with titles tied to their very being, and God accepted those titles as true, for "whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Gen 2:19).

Adam named the animals according to their nature, but language can also name things falsely. We can mislabel, naming something in a way that is not in accordance with its true nature. Or we can call something by its name but mean something different by it. This is what happens when the serpent uses the words *good* and *evil*. Concerning the tree, the serpent warns Eve, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). But the serpent means something strange by *good* and *evil*. After all, Adam and Eve already know that God is good; he has provided for their every need, given them purpose, and let them share in his image. Everything he has created has been declared good by him, and so following his command not to eat from the tree must also be for their good. Violating the prohibition of an all-knowing, good God can only lead to evil. So, Adam and Eve already knew good and evil in some sense.

However, the serpent meant something different by good and evil. His use of good and evil made Adam and Eve think that the referents for these words were maliciously hidden from them by a selfish God. The serpent, then, used the naming power of language deceptively. He used the labels that God had created and tried to give them meaning apart from him. But God controls all meaning, so trying to discern meaning apart from him is vain. When we depend on God's revealed meaning in Scripture, we can name something in accordance with its nature.

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[8]   Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 97.

Naming things in accordance with their nature also applies when we describe or categorize our own behaviors, either truly or falsely. After Cain murdered his brother, God said, "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain answered, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9). Cain's words do not correspond to his behavior. He knew exactly where Abel was—he had just killed him. Cain lied. He "misnamed" his own actions. In the words of Jonathan Swift, he said "a thing which was not."[9] Lying is a way of using the naming power of language deceptively and maliciously. This is something we've learned from the trickery of the serpent. When we seek to use words to name ideas, events, and behaviors in accordance with their nature—as much as that nature has been revealed by God—then we are following God's use of naming. When we do not, we are following the serpent's use, trying to mislead others by using words to draw people away from the way things actually are.

3. Words evaluate, judging good and evil. God uses language to *evaluate*. This feature of language is closely tied to naming, for in naming something we seek to reveal its true identity. But in evaluating, we narrow the view to judge whether something is good or evil. God speaks in order to judge whether a thought, action, or event is good or bad, true or false, desirable or despicable. God is the supreme arbiter of what is good and evil, and he is the first to pronounce something good (Gen 1:4). Linked to the labels of good and evil are repercussions: continued communion with God for good, and judgment for evil. Because the serpent encouraged Adam and Eve to go outside the parameters of the relationship God had set for them—an evil action—God pronounced judgment on the serpent (Gen 3:14–15). He then judged the woman (Gen 3:16) and the man (Gen 3:17) because they chose to follow the serpent's words rather than his own.

The serpent used words deceptively and expressed a false evaluation of God's words, behavior, and intent. When he tempted Eve, he suggested that God had been holding out on them. He impugns God's motives, saying that God told them to stay away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because he wanted to protect his higher knowledge. According to the serpent, God gives commands out of a selfish desire for power—something clearly evil. The serpent says what is evil is *good* and good is *evil*. This communication of a false judgment is criticized throughout the Bible, perhaps most notably in Isaiah, who calls down judgment upon the people: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" (Isa 5:20). This is precisely what the serpent has done: he has called God, the one being in the cosmos who is wholly good and true, a liar and a power-hungry manipulator. He rejects God's true words and communicates false evaluations to Adam and Eve.

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[9]   Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (New York: Peebles Press International, 1975), 258.

We run into the same problem when we try to judge right from wrong in isolation from God's words, or in a way that makes God's words subservient to our selfish desires. We label what is good "evil" and what is evil "good." Let's revisit Eve's conversation with the serpent. The serpent accuses God of trickery, of deceit—a textbook example of what is evil. In our familiarity with this passage we often overlook that Eve never opposes this evaluation. She accepts the serpent's evaluation, agrees with it, and acts on it, only to experience the bitter truth that it was the serpent, not God, who was false. Like the serpent, Eve did not take God at his word, and she did not use God's words to evaluate the serpent's message. This led to judgment in the form of physical pain and distance from the God of truth. With language, we are to evaluate the nature of a thought, action, or quality with reference to God's words. Without the guiding truth of God's revelation, we are all poor judges.

4. Words promise. God uses language to make *promises*. In his first promise, God warns his creatures: "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, *for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*" (Gen 2:16–17; emphasis added). God was true to his word. Adam and Eve ate from the tree, and they died—as has every creature since their time.

Yet, God made another promise after Adam and Eve's sin, a hopeful promise. He said the woman's seed would bruise the serpent's head, even though the serpent would bruise the seed's heel. This meant that one day death would come to the serpent, but it would come at great cost to the seed. Without this promise, we would have been doomed. Out of grace, God made it, fulfilled it in his Son, and passed it down to us in the Bible. For people who accept this promise, the integrity of God is firmly established. God has been true to his word! His promise has been kept. When danger or evil approaches, our hearts cling to the rock of God's integrity: he is who he says he is, and he has done what he said he would do.

The serpent, yet again, shows us what it is like to oppose God's use of language, this time by being a false promiser. He counters God's words. "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:4–5). When Adam and Eve sinned, they saw that the serpent had spoken in half-truths: their eyes were "opened," but they certainly were not like God. To their dismay, the serpent's promise was not fulfilled. What he claimed would come to pass did not come to pass, and so his integrity was damaged. We cannot take the serpent at his word.

Adam and Eve would struggle with the dilemma of promise-keeping and integrity, just as we do today. In a world of sinners, there is not a single person who we can know for certain will carry through on a promise. We make our best effort to take a person at his or her word, but time has shown that when we do this, we risk being hurt or disappointed. Our choice is the same as that of the first fallen humans:

either refuse to trust anyone by rejecting all promises, or risk the hurt and give people the opportunity to show their integrity, to be true to their word. The only one who has been and always will be true to his word is God himself. As his image-bearers, we seek to live with integrity by making and keeping promises, proving our words to be reliable. This means we must be careful, precise, and intentional when we use words to make promises to others.

5. Words direct. God uses language to give *direction*. He told his creatures to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:22) and "to work and keep" the garden (Gen 2:15). He engaged Adam and Eve with words by instructing them on how they should live: "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat'" (Gen 2:16–17). Language sets parameters for their relationship. It guides and directs. God tells his creatures clearly what to do and what not to do.

We've already seen how the serpent used words to misdirect God's creatures: telling them to do precisely what they should *not* do. Now, to be fair, the serpent never actually told Eve what to do; he insinuated it. Take another look at his words: "The serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'" (Gen 3:4–5). That is where the serpent stops, but he is all the more coy for stopping here. Suggesting direction can be far more effective than offering it outright. It gives the recipient the illusion of control. Had the serpent simply said, "Take the fruit from the tree!" Eve might have recoiled and sensed the contrast to God's command. Instead, the serpent is subtle, offering Eve a set of circumstances different from those she had at the time. It was as if the serpent left a small seed in Eve's heart and then walked away, confident that it would grow under her care to a size greater than she could foresee. And it did.

When Adam and Eve were sent out from the garden, they knew they were wholly to blame. God had been crystal clear with his directions. He didn't insinuate as the serpent did. There was no equivocation. He told them precisely what they should do for their good. This sets a template for our use of direction after the fall. We are to avoid insinuation, equivocation, and unnecessary abstraction when it comes to direction. Without being forthright and concrete about our direction, and without basing that direction on God's word, we risk misdirecting others. As recipients of direction, we need to be aware that God's direction overrides all human direction. When the directions of others seem "off," it may be a sign that we need to measure them against God's clear, unequivocal, and concrete word.

To summarize, Genesis 1–3 reveals five realities about the power of language. Depending on the speaker, words wield power for good or for evil. They create and shape relationships or they destroy and distort them. God's use of words is the

template for our use of them. God's words manifest communion, and our words are meant to follow that example rather than introduce disunion. God's words truly name what he creates, and we are to use words to name truly what we see around us: our thoughts, words, and behaviors, never letting lies mislead others by saying "a thing which was not." God's words perfectly evaluate and judge thoughts, words, and actions as good or evil, and we are to use his word to do the same. God's words communicate his promises to us—all of which he has fulfilled—and so we are meant to model his integrity by keeping the promises we make. That means being careful, precise, and intentional in extending promises to others. Lastly, God's words direct us as to how we should act as his image-bearers. Our direction for others should adhere to God's direction in Scripture, and, inversely, we should measure the direction of others against the direction we find in the Bible.

In counseling we either use or abuse language in the ways we have described.

Language in Counseling

Now, what does this have to do with counseling? Whether in face-to-face conversation or in the interaction between writer and reader, counseling involves language. In counseling we either use or abuse language in the ways we have described.

You may have noticed that every feature of language presupposes two parties, two people interacting with each other. It brings people into *fellowship*. It names *the people around us*. Language then moves us to act. When we evaluate whether something is good or evil, we *know how to respond* to each other. When we make promises *to one another*, it shapes our expectations of each other. And when we use words to direct, it shows that we can be guided *by someone else*. Language is not an isolating behavior; it always involves another.

This is where counseling comes into play. It is a largely verbal relationship, an other-focused activity. Effective counseling is about bringing healing and restoration through redeeming conversations. It keeps relationships primary, realizing that "the work of redemption involves our individual relationship with Christ alongside of our relationships with others."[10] Because relationships remain the focus of Christian counseling, the way in which we use words is critical. In relation to the features of language introduced above, our *manner* of speech is just as important as the *content*. But the former is often forgotten when it comes time to speak or write. If we are

[10]   Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *How People Change* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2008), 65.

going to use words to connect with others, then we must be conscious of *how* we speak and write. Do our words build up the relationship between two image-bearers (communion)? Do they identify other people, along with their problems, using biblically warranted labels (naming)? Do they clearly distinguish between right and wrong based on God's word (evaluating)? Do they offer concrete hope based on what God has done through Christ (promising)? And do they provide guidance that is faithful to Scripture (directing)?

Keeping these questions in mind will help us strengthen the bridge we are trying to build from ourselves to another person, opening the door of empathy for the struggling alcoholic, the anxiety-ridden mother of four, the senior citizen mourning his late wife, and the cancer survivor elated by the news of a clean MRI. After all, the mere presence of words—we all know—does not guarantee that we will minister effectively. Even when we share life experiences as an alcoholic, a stressed-out parent, a widower, a cancer survivor—we need to know both *what* to say and *how* to say it.

Christ's Use of Language

When it comes to using words, we need to remember that language is Trinitarian by nature. The God of Scripture—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—uses words to create and shape his creation. He communes with us. He names what is around us. He evaluates the moral quality of thoughts and actions. He promises us a covenant relationship with him, and directs us as to how we should act within that covenant.

As creatures made in his image, we are meant to imitate God's use of words. But sin marred the image of God, so we misuse and abuse words. Sin breaks God's word, but it is finally defeated by the one who kept God's word, who lived by God's words as we were meant to do (Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4; Luke 4:4). Jesus had a perfect understanding of God's words. In him we see each of the features of language redeemed and perfected.

In Christ we see the power of words used to reshape a distorted creation. When the centurion begged Christ to heal his servant, he relied on the power of Christ's speech: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only *say the word*, and my servant will be healed" (Matt 8:8). The centurion knew that Jesus' very words were enough to heal a sick man, to cleanse a leper, and to raise a man from the dead.

In Christ we witness the ***communion*** that words foster. In John 17, Jesus communicates with his father about us. He prays that believers

> may all *be one*, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may *be in us*, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may *be one* even as we are one, *I in them and you in me*, that they may *become perfectly one*. (John

17:21–23; emphasis added).

The Word desires to be united with those whom he loves. The pronouns in this passage make it unmistakably clear in every clause how communion with others is at the heart of language: *you*, *me*, *I*, *they*, *us*, *them*, *we*. Christ has come to restore communion between fallen creatures and a holy Creator. In him, the isolated "I" becomes a communal "we." Christians are not unique as creatures, but they are bound in fellowship to a relational God. In Christ, we have communion.

In Jesus Christ we find the **name** that is most true, most beautiful, solely redeeming, and sufficient for salvation "so that at *the name of Jesus* every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that *Jesus Christ* is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10–11; emphasis added). *Jesus* means "God is salvation," while *Christ* means "the anointed one." What a name! Our Lord's name is "God is salvation *through* his anointed one." The truth of Christ's name shatters the bonds of all false and deceptive naming. His is the name above all names (Phil 2:9).

In Christ we see what God-centered **evaluation** looks like. He knows evil even when it masquerades as good, and he finds good even when it is surrounded by evil, never confusing the two. In John's gospel, Jesus tells us that the world "hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil" (John 7:7). He also distinguishes between works that appear to be good but which are in fact driven by ulterior motives, such as the pious works of the Pharisees and Sadducees:

> Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. (Matt 6:1–2).

Christ evaluates according to God's word, judging based on the heart's intentions, not on mere appearances.

In Christ's words we find the most wonderful **promises**—all of them fulfilled, showing that we can take the *Word* at his word. In Luke's gospel, he tells the nervous disciples,

> See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets *will be accomplished*. For he *will be delivered* over to the Gentiles and *will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon*. And after flogging him, they *will kill him*, and on the third day he *will rise*. (Luke 18:31–33; emphasis added)

Jesus proved to be a man of perfect integrity: everything he promised happened just as he said it would.

Finally, in Christ we find clear and unequivocal **direction**. We see this in his

direct imperatives and moral insights. For example, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt 5:28). Jesus' direction goes beyond appearances. His words cut to the heart, to our motives. This is an attribute of God (1 Sam 16:7).

Jesus is able to observe the ordinary behaviors of others and draw out spiritual truths that alert us as to how we should act. Consider his words about a widow:

> A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mark 12:42–44)

True giving is not based on raw numbers. It is a ratio that reveals the heart. It is not how much one gives that defines giving before God, but how much one holds onto for oneself. The widow let it all go, abandoning her fortune to God, and thus emerged as an example of "moral heroism."[11] Jesus' disciples surely had been re-*directed*.

Christ has redeemed language in each of its dimensions. In him we are reconciled with the God who speaks, and so we begin the long process of learning how to speak and write in an effective, Christ-honoring way.

* * *

Part 2 of this article will focus on counseling others by writing. Letters, notes, articles, or books can help people. When we write to help others, can we use words as Christ used them? If so, how can we do this in the counseling genre? Every context of ministry has its own demands, so, what kind of language is helpful in counseling, and what kind is hurtful? What kind is powerful and what kind is anemic? I will flesh out answers to these questions in Part 2.

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[11] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 819.

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