

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD: JOHN 1:1–5 AND A REVELATIONAL THEORY OF METAPHOR

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

ABSTRACT

Because special revelation re-calibrates our understanding not merely of spiritual matters but of natural and physical matters as well, we should strive to develop a “revelational approach to metaphor,” that is, an approach to metaphor that shows how language is ultimately rooted in God himself and thus communicates far more than we often imagine. Even the common understandings we have of words with regard to physicality (e.g., “life,” “light”) must be shaped by the truth that ultimate life and light are found in relationship with the Word of the Father (John 1:1), in the power of the Spirit. This article develops a revelational theory of metaphor in dialogue with another common theory of metaphor: tension theory. It ends by offering implications for our use and understanding of everyday language. The article affirms throughout that we must understand all of language, metaphors included, through the special revelation of God.

The necessity of special revelation appears not only with respect to man’s failure to know and react to spiritual things right, but also with respect to his inability to interpret “natural” things aright.

Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*

I. *Introduction*

I am Nicodemus . . . and so are you. Every Christian has rapped on the door of Christ in the middle of the night, sought an answer to a simple question, and ended up reborn. The rest of life, we might say, is about understanding and living out that second birth.

Nicodemus approached Jesus after nightfall with the hope of learning more about him. Before he encountered Jesus, he had carried with him a perceptual grid for reality: a way of understanding the world both physically and spiritually. Everything he perceived and understood was bound together with all the

Pierce Taylor Hibbs is Associate Director for Theological Curriculum and Instruction in the Theological English Department at Westminster Theological Seminary.

glorious complexity of a Jackson Pollock painting. He knew about fish and finances, death and daylight, sacrifice and sapience. All of what he experienced in his embodied existence was expressed on a single canvas of perception, stretched as tightly as the skin around his knuckles when he struck the wood on the door of the Word.

Of course, the encounter did not go as Nicodemus might have imagined. He came to admit Jesus' divine influence, but then found himself puzzled at this teacher's claim that he must be born again in order to see and enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5). Why could Nicodemus not see the kingdom? In essence, Nicodemus did not have Christ at the center of his perceptual canvas. "You need a new canvas," in effect, is what Jesus told Nicodemus.

You will have to abandon your total thought system and begin to build it all over again. You will have to accept my goodness and power as primary data, and start from there. Like a baby coming into the new world, you will have to learn to live with these facts before you can understand their source or reason. You must learn to accept the revolution this makes in your whole spiritual life without being able at the moment to understand its source any more than the sailor understands the source of the wind that moves his sails.¹

The point is that "Christianity is not an accretion; it is not something added. It is a *new* holistic outlook which is satisfied with nothing less than penetration to the farthest corners of the mind and the understanding."² An encounter with the person of Christ meant that Nicodemus would receive a blank canvas, with Christ's portrait at the center.

Today, we encounter the same Christ in the words of the Bible. Special revelation is not simply an addendum to our mainly functional view of reality; it recalibrates all of what we know about anything, from sociology and science to literature and linguistics. The aim of this article is to set out one of the ways in which special revelation, namely John 1:1–5, helps us re-envision language, particularly metaphor.³

Far from being a tangential triviality, a biblical view of metaphor is critical to our understanding of created reality as a whole, for metaphor was not absent at the dawn of creation, as John's Gospel intimates: "In the beginning was the Word." Poythress notes that "the presence of the Word before the Father is not only the source of human metaphorical language; it is the source of the world. God created the world through his Word. We therefore expect that the world itself is shot through with metaphor."

That reality is bound up with metaphor should be no threat to Christians. Certainly, when Derrida and Nietzsche referred to reality as metaphorical, they

¹ Kenneth L. Pike, "Language and Life 1: A Stereoscopic Window on the World," *BSac* 114, no. 454 (1957): 56.

² Kenneth L. Pike, "Prescription for Intellectuals," *Eternity* 8 (August 1957): 45.

³ Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 284–85.

meant to disparage our trust in the referential nature of words, but this was an outgrowth of their godless view of language. Derrida, for example, understood language as a rigidly horizontal system of *différance*.⁴ By *différance*, he meant that words are signifiers that can only be traced to other signifiers in a never ending labyrinth of language.⁵ We cannot get outside of language to access absolute reality. We can never say what *is* because our words only refer (or *defer*) to other words. Metaphor, however, tells us what something *is* and *is not*, and so is emblematic of our imprisonment within a purely horizontal system of expression.

Derrida reads the history of Western philosophy as the systematic repression of metaphor; metaphysics, in particular, represses the “is not.” Where metaphor “transfers” meaning from one domain to another, so metaphysics transfers a concrete image to the realm of abstract truth. “Meta” is that movement that carries words beyond. For Derrida, such “transgression” is the original philosophical sin: the metaphorical “as” is mistaken for the metaphysical “is.”... The problem, as Derrida sees it, is that all language—indeed, all of reality—is, so to speak, metaphorical in nature; “is and is not” is thus truer to the *différance* behind things.⁶

Nietzsche is similar in his derisive view of language and his affirmation of metaphor. Because Nietzsche assumed God was dead, he made the logical conclusion that ultimate meaning does not exist. The only meaning we have is manmade, namely through metaphors, which “create relations between things.”⁷ In suggesting that reality is metaphorical, Nietzsche claims that we create coherence and relationships in order to cope with and function in a world that is summarily Godless, and, therefore, meaningless.

These views are in stark contrast to what the Christian means by saying that metaphor is bound up with reality. We are neither saying that we are trapped in language nor that we create relations in a meaningless world. Rather, based on the Trinitarian metaphor that the Son is the Word of the Father, we acknowledge that all of our words are measured against the standard of that original Word, who gives us life and light.⁸ Metaphor, then, enlightens and enlivens us more deeply than we know. All of life, not merely biological but also spiritual, is linked with the metaphor of the Son as the creative and redemptive Word of the Father. Yet, while this metaphor certainly serves to illuminate God’s

⁴ “*Différance* speaks simultaneously of the tendency of words to differentiate themselves (i.e., ‘to differ’) from other words and of necessity, ‘to defer’ to other words in order to situate their proper meaning” (David Guretzki, “Barth, Derrida, and *Différance*: Is There a Difference?” *Didaskalia* 53 [2002]: 55).

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “A Lamp in the Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics of ‘Aesthetic’ Theology,” *TJ* 8 (1987): 25, 38–39.

⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 130.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Vern S. Poythress, “Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til’s Idea of Analogy,” *WTJ* 57 (1995): 193.

communication with us and our communication with one another in general, it also accounts more particularly for our use of metaphor. Van Til himself articulated this in a striking passage from his *Introduction to Systematic Theology*. We all use metaphor, he claimed, based on our own experience in attempting to draw relations between what we know and what we wish to know more deeply. Christ himself used this phenomenon in his own communication.

When Christ spoke of the vine and the branches, he did not hesitate to use that figure as symbolic of the relation of himself to the church. It is of great interest and of great importance to ask ourselves on what ground Christ was able to do this. Christ was not just a clever human being who saw interesting parallels to human experience in nature. Christ was the Logos of creation as well as the Logos of redemption. The things of nature were adapted by him to the things of the Spirit. The lower was made for the higher. The lower did not just exist independently of the higher. And because all things are made by God, that is, through the eternal Logos of creation, we too can use symbolism and analogy and know that, though we must always look for the *tertium comparationis* [the third element, the point of comparison, which explains the relation of the symbol to reality] in all symbolism, nevertheless it is at bottom true. Without a revelational foundation all symbolism and all art in general would fall to the ground.⁹

Metaphor, of course, is in the family of analogy and symbolism. Van Til is capitalizing on his firm faith in the Trinity and drawing a conclusion about language. God is a relational being, and metaphor is a means of expressing linguistic relation.¹⁰ How fitting, then, for John to speak of the Son with a linguistic metaphor, and how powerful metaphors can be *because of the relations!* We will explore the implications of the Son as the Word of the Father in more detail later. For now, it is sufficient to keep in mind that the Christian has a Trinitarian, revelational grounding for metaphor.

Lastly, at the outset, we must admit that metaphor as a topic of linguistic and philosophical inquiry has carved itself a canyon in academic history. But our intention is not to rappel down the precipice and survey the riches that can be gained from comparing one theory of metaphor to a plethora of others. The aim of this article is not comparative; it is constructive. We are concerned to see how the Bible shapes our view of metaphor, and we will do so by using the thought of Kenneth Pike. For the sake of clarity, however, we will contrast our revelational theory of metaphor with a popular secular perspective, tension

⁹ 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), 124–25.

¹⁰ “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” (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).

theory, in order to show more concretely how it is unique. I hope to establish that special revelation—the Bible—has a definitive role in helping us understand metaphor—along with the rest of reality.

II. *Metaphor*

A few initial comments are in order before we outline the tenets of tension theory. First, we must have some basic sense of what a metaphor is and what it does. On the broadest level, a metaphor is simply an instance of when “comparative language is used so that what is unknown may be understood in terms of what is known.”¹¹ Thus, every metaphor has two parts, and various theories label these parts differently: the vehicle and the tenor, the source and the target, or, as in tension theory, the subsidiary and principal subject.¹² The relationship between these two parts helps us understand one or the other in a deeper sense than we had before. For example, the metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS helps us understand how the features and stages of plant life illuminate the features and stages of human life.¹³ It is important to note here that the parts of a metaphor always have correspondences: sets of features that seem integrally related to and yet clearly distinct from one another. People and plants both die, but people do not exit the world by having their roots cut, unless we are speaking, once again, metaphorically. The more correspondences between the parts, the richer the metaphor.

Yet metaphors do more than compare; they create.¹⁴ Lakoff and Turner suggest that metaphor “exercises our minds so that we can extend our normal powers of comprehension beyond the range of the metaphors we are brought up to see the world through.”¹⁵ Extending our powers of comprehension means that our understanding will grow not just qualitatively but quantitatively. In other words, metaphors can extend meaning through comparison, but they can also create, or perhaps better, *reveal* new meaning by juxtaposing two things that had not previously been placed in relation to one another.¹⁶

¹¹ Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1989), 299. “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another” (George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], 5).

¹² See Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*; George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 63–65.

¹³ Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 12–14.

¹⁴ Here we use “create” in a limited, creaturely sense, for, as Van Til pointed out, our goal as creatures is not to be creatively constructive but “receptively reconstructive” (Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 213). God is the only one who has “created” in a proper sense, so we might think of metaphorical creation as the uncovering of what God has already created.

¹⁵ Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 214.

¹⁶ Douglas Berggren refers to this with the terms *epiphor* and *diaphor*. He quotes Philip Wheelwright, who suggests that *epiphor* occurs through pictorial comparison (calling someone “hawk nose”), structured ratios (“the foot of the mountain”), or emotion-like textures (“brooding

Yet, whether a metaphor compares or creates meaning (or both), it is still a linguistically delivered *relationship* between words or concepts we would not commonly pair with one another. Metaphor, in this sense, is relational. It not only relates words or concepts but also the people who seek to understand or build upon them in a given context to convey truth.¹⁷ Metaphors, we might say, are the linguistic bridges we build between words and concepts in order to convey meaning and commune with others.¹⁸

III. *Tension Theory*

With a basic understanding of metaphor, we can now outline tension theory so that we have something with which to compare a revelational theory of metaphor.

Tension theory uses the labels of *subsidiary* and *principal subject* to refer to the parts of a metaphor.¹⁹ In the previous example, PEOPLE ARE PLANTS, people, with all of their attendant behavior, would be the principal subject and plant life the subsidiary subject; both of these subjects are brought into relationship by the word “plants,” which Berggren calls the *sign focus* of the metaphor.²⁰ The sign focus, then, always has two referents; it is, in Wheelwright’s terminology, an instance of “plurisignation,” meaning that we must keep both signifiers in mind in order for the metaphor to work. Later, Berggren refers to this ability to see both subjects in tension as *stereoscopic vision*.

In addition to claiming that metaphors are composed of the sign focus, subsidiary subject, and principal subject, tension theory further affirms that “the difference between the referents of any metaphor must be such that a literal or univocal interpretation of their conjunction would produce absurdity.”²¹ My wife, in other words, does not stand in the sun with her feet rooted in the soil, photosynthetically sustaining her life. In other words, a metaphor “is implicitly akin to a counterfactual statement.”²² This is the source of the “tension” in tension theory.

Lastly, tension theory posits that metaphor actually creates meaning, or at least reveals antecedent meaning, from the subsidiary and principal subject by “construing the one in terms of the other.”²³ This created or revealed meaning

mountains”). *Diaphor*, Max Black suggests, is “the creation of new meaning by juxtaposition and synthesis.” See Douglas Berggren, “The Use and Abuse of Metaphor 1,” *Review of Metaphysics* 16 (1962): 241–42.

¹⁷ Metaphors “may carry truth judged relative to the joint expectancies of speaker-hearer acting within the same frame of reference of expectancies, intent, and literary genre” (Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982], 104).

¹⁸ On metaphors as bridges, see Kenneth L. Pike, “Morals and Metaphor,” *Interchange* 12 (1972): 228–31.

¹⁹ Berggren, “Use and Abuse of Metaphor 1,” 238.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 238–39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

²² *Ibid.*, 240.

²³ *Ibid.*, 242.

is called transformed assimilation. It is this *transformed assimilation* that brings the tension of tension theory into focus: though we construe one subject in terms of another, neither is collapsed into the other.

If the initial differences between the two referents were not simultaneously preserved, even while the referents are also being transformed into closer alignment, the metaphorical character of the construing process would be lost. The possibility of comprehension of metaphorical construing requires, therefore, a peculiar and rather sophisticated intellectual ability which W. Bedell Stanford metaphorically labels “stereoscopic vision”: the ability to entertain two different points of view at the same time.²⁴

In sum, the tension of tension theory arises because, “on the one hand, a logical or empirical absurdity stands in apparent conflict with a possible truth. On the other hand, this possible truth may itself depend upon a creative interaction between diverse perspectives which cannot be literalized or disentangled without destroying the kind of insight, truth, or reality which the metaphor provides.”²⁵ Tension theory can thus be illustrated with the diagram below.²⁶

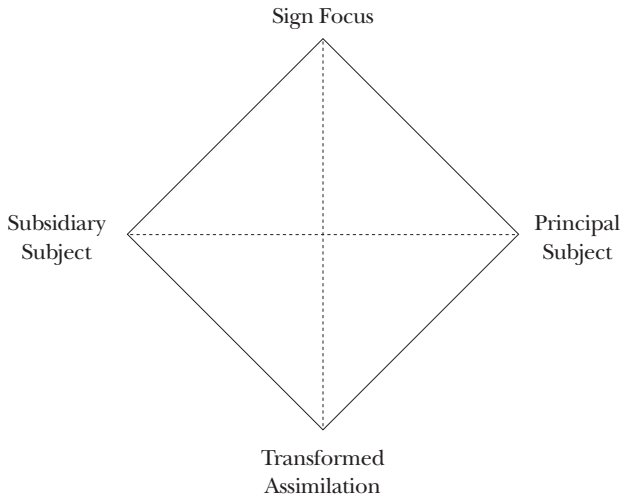


Figure 1: *Tension Theory*

²⁴ Ibid., 243.

²⁵ Ibid., 244.

²⁶ This diagram is a slightly modified form of the one that Berggren himself provides in the previously referenced article.

IV. *Building a Revelational Theory of Metaphor*

As stated earlier, our goal is not comparative or strictly evaluative. We are not aiming to judge the validity of tension theory, but only to use it as a foil to better understand our current focus: a revelational theory of metaphor.

To start, we need to clarify what we mean by “revelational” here. Van Til was keen on pressing the truth that all of reality is revelational of God.²⁷ All words ultimately reveal the God who speaks, so in what sense can we have a “revelational” approach to metaphor? Is our approach to metaphor not revelational by default, since we are working within a world that is exhaustively revelational of God?

In the introduction, we stated that special revelation redefines our understanding of reality. Once we come to see the truth of Scripture and, by the Spirit, are brought to faith in the person of Christ, then we are in the same position that Nicodemus was in: our rebirth demands re-comprehension of all reality according to the Word of God. Nicodemus certainly had a special encounter with the incarnate Christ, but we also encounter Christ in the words of Scripture, since God’s words are God’s speech, and the Son is tied to that speech.²⁸ God is always present with his words because words are always present to and derived from *the Word*.²⁹ In this sense, we all have our Nicodemus experience and are working out that experience in reality.

In light of the above distinction, when we use the phrase “revelational approach,” we mean “special-revelational,” that is, biblical. To outline this approach, we will introduce Kenneth Pike’s understanding of metaphor, in comparison with tension theory, and then suggest how God’s special revelation can shape our approach to metaphor and to all of reality. Throughout the following pages, we will use John 1:1–5 as a test case, since it offers broadly accessible metaphors: words, life, and light.

1. *Kenneth Pike’s Understanding of Metaphor*

Pike distinguishes between “central” and “marginal” meanings of morphemes (meaningful linguistic units). For the sake of simplicity, we will consider words in their central and marginal meanings rather than staying strictly focused on morphemes themselves, since words can be a single morpheme or a combination of morphemes.

Now, how do we know what the central meaning of a word is? There are several factors that help us decide. (1) Time: “the central meaning will be one

²⁷ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 119–36.

²⁸ On the relation between the Word and God’s creational words, and the specific words of Scripture, see Vern S. Poythress, “God and Language,” in *Did God Really Say? Affirming the Truthfulness and Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed. David B. Garner (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2012), 94–97; Poythress, “Reforming Ontology and Logic,” 188.

²⁹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010), ch. 11.

which was learned early in life,” thus carrying a certain “primacy.”³⁰ (2) Physicality: the central meaning “is likely to have reference to a physical situation—a physical situation which is early encountered by the child as he learns the language.”³¹ For example, my son learned the word *head* by bumping it into a table; he does not yet know the marginal, idiomatic meaning of “having a good head on his shoulders.”³² (3) Explanatory power: “if two meanings are related, the more central is the one in terms of which the other can be explained.”³³ Pike offers the humorous example of a boy who thought that *pigs* were properly called such because they were so dirty. The child’s mother referenced the word *pig* in the context of eating (*eating like a pig*) or of cleanliness (*filthy as a pig*), before the child had the opportunity to see a pig. So, he had reversed the central and marginal meanings of his peers, classifying the animal according to human habits rather than understanding human behavior as metaphorically tied to the behavior of an animal.³⁴ (4) Frequency: within communities, central meanings “may occur with greater frequency than any one of the marginal meanings.”³⁵ These criteria are meant to be seen as descriptive guides rather than prescriptive rules. Language, for Pike, cannot be so cleanly compartmentalized. Nevertheless, these criteria can help us discover the central and marginal meanings of a word, and we can also apply these features to phrases and sentences. For instance, “the central meaning of a phrase . . . would first of all be related to the central meaning of its included words. Thus the phrase as a whole, if treated in its central meaning, would have its included words understood in their central meanings.”³⁶

Now, what does all of this have to do with metaphor? Metaphorical meanings are, for Pike, marginal to the central meanings of words or phrases. And, what’s more, they are dependent on the central meanings. Metaphorical uses of words are “dependent or derived” and “develop as an extension of words used in central meanings.”³⁷ Here Pike goes deeper than tension theory by laying a semantic and pragmatic, rather than lexical, foundation for metaphor. That

³⁰ Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 600.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 600–601.

³² Note that this also is tied to, and perhaps is derived from, the notion of “observation sentences,” i.e., sentences that point out objects or events in one’s physical environment. See Kenneth L. Pike, *Talk, Thought, and Thing* (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1993), 1–8; Willard Van Orman Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1978), 28. Pike was particularly familiar with Quine’s work.

³³ Pike, *Language in Relation*, 601.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.* Note that idiomatic meanings of phrases can sometimes be central, thus bucking the trend outlined above. “Take it easy” does not mean that I want someone one to obtain something in an easy manner; it means “I wish you well” or “don’t push yourself too hard.”

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 603.

does not eclipse the notion of tension, however, as we will see; it merely takes another step backwards to gain perspective on meaning in relation to use.

At this point, Pike introduces an analogy for the way in which words or phrases pass from marginal, metaphorical use to “central-meaning” use, and vice versa. If we imagine that physical reality is a planet and a word used in reference to it is a satellite,

then the distribution of the satellite in a wider orbit carries with it more energy than its distribution in a narrower orbit. As the satellite loses energy it spirals down into an inner, closer orbit. Let us now assume that the central meaning of a word has reference to an orbit. Words occur in particular distributions which are frequent and close to the physical situation which they name directly. If, however, the same word is used in distributions remote from the original distribution, and especially if they are remote from the physical contexts in which the words were first learned by the child, or within which they have their central meanings, these special distributions carry with them a certain kind of “communication energy.” These extended symbolic usages, because of their special distributions, have a heavier impact on the listener. . . . If, however, the word is used very frequently in this metaphorical sense, and as such comes in more and more contexts, so that it takes the distributional place of the word which formerly was used for the central meaning relevant to it, the communication energy of this special meaning has been dissipated, and the now “dead metaphor” carries no more impact than an ordinary word in its ordinary central meaning.³⁸

Pike’s analogy can be illustrated as follows:

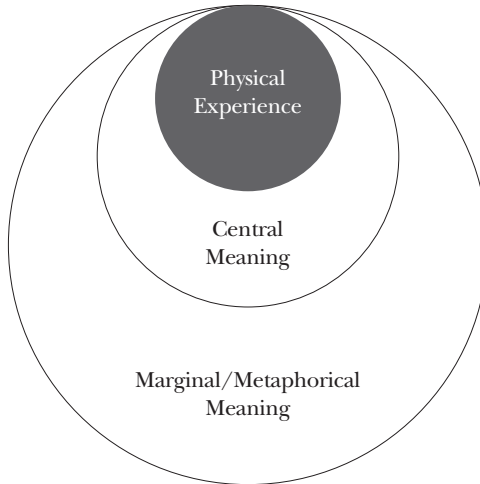


Figure 2: *Pike's Understanding of Metaphorical Meaning*

³⁸ Ibid., 603–4.

Note here that Pike is more focused on the *effect* of metaphorical language (what it does) than on its *inner structure* (what it is). This is one of the reasons why it would not be fair to compare tension theory with Pike's analogy, since the two are serving separate ends.

Keeping Pike's focus in mind, we can see from his orbit analogy that he brings into play two critical features for any understanding of metaphor: (1) physical experience must be adequately accounted for; and (2) metaphorical meaning must have an explanation that is tied to such experience.³⁹ Remember Van Til's words, "The lower was made for the higher. The lower did not just exist independently of the higher." He links physicality with spirituality; he does not bifurcate them. We need both. But Van Til was also right to point out that a proper understanding of metaphor must also contain a third informant: special revelation. This is where we can supplement Pike's model.

Cornelius Van Til was adamant that we always account for revelation in our understanding of humanity, and that would include the language we use. We have a *revelational metaphysic* and a *revelational epistemology* because we live in a world that is "exhaustively revelational" of the triune God.⁴⁰ All that exists, and all that we know about what exists comes by way of God's revelation. But it seems this has not yet been worked into our understanding of metaphorical meaning—and we are all the poorer for it. A revelational approach to metaphor would, I argue, be a means of revolutionizing our understanding of language and showing us the richness of biblical revelation.

2. *A Revelational Theory of Metaphor*

Here is how a revelational approach to metaphor would work, based on Pike's previous discussion. We begin, as Pike does, with physical experience or central meanings of words.⁴¹ We then have marginal and metaphorical mean-

³⁹ Note Reverend William Jones's emphasis on the figurative language of Scripture, which draws on physical experiences in order to teach spiritual content: "In this sort of language did our blessed Saviour instruct his hearers; always referring them to such objects as were familiar to their senses, that they might see the propriety and feel the force of his doctrine. This method he observed, not in compliance with any customary speech peculiar to the Eastern people, but consulting the exigence of human nature, which is everywhere the same" (quoted in Stephen Prickett, *Words and the Word: Language, Poetics, and Biblical Interpretation* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 215).

⁴⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 169. With regards to revelational metaphysic, we must remember that God's speech both specifies what exists and how it exists (see Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014], 105). In that sense, ontology is itself linguistic. With regards to a revelational epistemology, Van Til writes, "Since the human mind is created by God and is therefore in itself naturally revelational of God, the mind may be sure that its system is true and corresponds on a finite scale to the system of God" (*Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 292).

⁴¹ These central and marginal meanings of words, again, are already revelational in the sense of being bound up with general revelation. Our focus here, however, is how they are illuminated by special revelation.

ings of words, but by the communicative nature of special revelation, God can and has revealed himself in creation with metaphors in a way that has the potential to redefine even our central meanings of words.⁴² The most potent example of this is the metaphor of the Son as “the Word” of the Father.

To begin understanding this metaphor, we start with personal experience. How are words used by others around us? What do we do when we speak? What does it accomplish? There is a plethora of experiential data available to us as we answer these questions. We can gather data from phonetics (sound systems), phonemics (particular sets of sounds within a language), articulation (how sounds are produced physically), graphics (how words are inscribed and arranged in a visual medium), pragmatics (how people use words to accomplish a certain end), ethics (in what senses and by what standards we judge a word to be used with good or evil intentions), and so forth. There is no shortage of data because words occur in so many different contexts and are used to do so many different things. Drawing on a selected pool of this data, we use both our central and marginal meanings to come to a rough conclusion of what it might mean *for the Son* to be *the Word*.⁴³ At this point, remember, the metaphor “the Son is the Word” is in an outer orbit, and our curiosity as to its meaning is testifying to what Pike calls its massive “communication energy.”⁴⁴

Based on the experiential data we have gathered from numerous “inner orbits,” we begin traveling toward the outer orbit that contains the unique metaphor we wish to understand (the Son as the Word of the Father). Perhaps it means something along the lines of the Son being the Father’s communication, the expression of his thought, or the communicative action he takes. But this is not where our understanding ends.

Up to this point we have only been considering *human* meaning. When we are told that the Son is the Word of the Father, that metaphor, coming as it does from special revelation, has *divine* meaning, so we look to revelation itself (Scripture) to understand what it could mean for the Son to be the Father’s

⁴² “Revelation is communicative. By revealing himself to human beings, God desires to establish and maintain communion with us and to make this communion between him and us steadily richer” (see J. van Genderen and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Gerrit Bilkes and Ed M. van der Maas [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008], 24–26).

⁴³ For example, drawing on a select number of examples from everyday experience, we might gather the expressions “I spoke several words to him” and “I had a word with him.” The former is an example of “word” used in its central meaning (graphic and aural significations that reference objects in reality), while the latter is an example of “word” used more marginally, meaning “conversation” or “discussion.” Another example of “words” used centrally would be the instruction we give to our toddler when he shouts or grunts if he does not get his way: “use your words.”

⁴⁴ It is important to add that this metaphor, given its referent, cannot ever become a “dead metaphor,” especially in light of the resurrection of the Son. This adds a whole different dimension to this metaphor that we cannot explore here. But we must note that not all of the metaphors of Scripture fit neatly into Pike’s explanation, and he would not expect them to do so. The Son as the Word of the Father is an ever enlivening and enlightening metaphor.

Word. The Son incarnate, Jesus Christ, lived an embodied, self-sacrificial, God-honoring life. He bound himself to a particular community, cared for their physical and spiritual needs, and taught them to give up all things for the sake of the heavenly kingdom and creaturely communion with the Trinity (John 17).

Here again we see that the meaning of the Word is not divorced from physical reality, for we understand the eternal Son by looking at the incarnate Son as he lived among us. It is that knowledge that helps us better understand what it means for the Son to be the Word of the Father. The Son is the perfect and holistic expression of the Father in eternity; he glorifies the Father without end, as does the Spirit, who glorifies the Son and Father, and so on and so forth. When we think of the Son as the Word of the Father, then we grasp, as much as is possible for finite minds, that “the Father does not distance Himself from the Son and Holy Spirit, and They do not think about separating Themselves from the Father. Rather, each sees Himself in the other and is more preoccupied with the other’s good than with His own.”⁴⁵ By the mutual love each person has for the other persons, we learn that the Trinity is a gapless God, and yet a God who chooses to communicate with himself (internally) and with his creatures (externally). The Son as the Word of the Father means that language for the Trinity is the highest form of communion, showcasing the fact that the persons of the Godhead were, are, and always will be “inextricably intertwined.”⁴⁶

But we must still go further. In light of the fact that human language is analogical, we take this understanding of the Word and use it as an illuminating perspective on the current central and marginal uses of the term “word.”⁴⁷ Words, from our experience, might merely seem to be instruments for information transfer or arbitrary signs in systems that serve only the individual. But if the Word illuminates our understanding, then we begin to see that words comprise the lifeblood of communion and the salt of relationships. They are not arbitrary signifiers for self-serving purposes, but means for communion—means which reveal that we are *communicators* made in the image of the self-communicating God and that we are *with* our words. Here, then, is a revelational model for metaphor.

⁴⁵ Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Holy Trinity: In the Beginning There Was Love*, trans. Roland Clark (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), 42.

⁴⁶ Daniel F. Stramara Jr., “Gregory of Nyssa’s Terminology for Trinitarian Perichoresis,” *VC* 52 (1998): 263.

⁴⁷ If, as Lakoff and Johnson suggest, “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another,” then we must say that the relationship can always be extended. We understand the Son in terms of the Word, but we also understand words in terms of the Word. See Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 5.

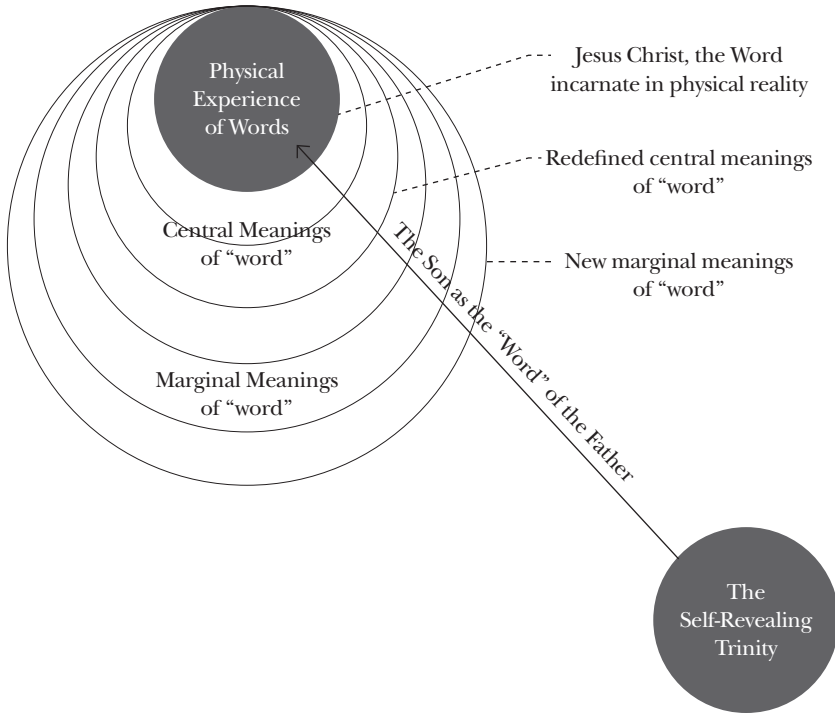


Figure 3: *A Revelational Approach to Metaphor*

The revolutionary nature of this approach surfaces in two places. First, it challenges what oftentimes becomes the idol of “literal language” with the rich and tangible revealed language of the Bible. Literal language is helpful and has its place, but, as we noted, all of language at its roots is bound up with metaphor. So, language cannot be *purely* literal. In the late 1980s, John Frame helpfully noted that “there is no reason to have any general theological preference for literal language over figurative or to assume that every metaphor must be literally explained in precise academic terms. Scripture does not do that. Often, in fact, figurative language says more, and says it more clearly, than corresponding literal language would do.”⁴⁸ Second, a revelational theory of metaphor helps us to relate spiritual truth to earthly description, when oftentimes the former is left out of the equation. It does not discount earthly reality by doing so, but it does tell us that there is more to reality than what we see, and that what we

⁴⁸ Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 227–28. A few pages later he adds that we must also be conscious of the “disanalogy” that is present with every analogy. This refers to the tension phenomenon of tension theory. Note the earlier quotation from Berggren: “The difference between the referents of any metaphor must be such that a literal or univocal interpretation of their conjunction would produce absurdity.”

see must be understood by what we cannot see (Heb 11:1). Thus, we have a faith-based approach to linguistic meaning.⁴⁹ The “Word,” then, as God’s self-expression—his creative and redemptive speech—is the archetypal meaning for our creaturely use of the term “word.” The same applies, we will see, to the concepts “life” and “light.”

Thus far, we can see that a revelational theory of metaphor still fulfills the criteria that Pike’s model offers, but it goes beyond it to include a role for special revelation, which is critical for those who hold to orthodox Christianity. It affirms that God is deeply involved in human language, not simply because he chooses to be, but because he himself is a communicative being and all that he has made reflects him.

How does this theory engage with tension theory? To be sure, there is a sort of tension in any metaphor. When John tells his readers that the Son is the Word of the Father, we likely see the sign focus, “Word,” as it relates to a subsidiary subject (perhaps verbal communication) and a principal subject (the Son). With these two subjects in mind, we *begin* by using stereoscopic vision (viewing both “the Word” and “the Son” simultaneously) to arrive at a transformed assimilation: the Son is the embodied verbal revelation of the Father. But we do not stop with tension, for one of the reasons such tension arises is because of our effort to maintain the “uni-directionality” of the metaphor. Our goal is only to comprehend the Son in a deeper way, not the term “word.” But a revelational theory of metaphor underscores that we understand a great deal about the term “word” in addition to learning a great deal about the Son. Just as a bridge carries traffic in both directions, so metaphors are *bidirectional*. Certainly, an author can and often does have a *primary* focus, and most often focuses on moving the semantic traffic in one direction. John is not primarily trying to instruct us about the nature of human words; rather, he is deepening our understanding of the second person of the Trinity. But that does not mean that the bridge built by the metaphor disallows *secondary* traffic in the other direction. That is the beauty of revelation. It reveals *more* than what we expect or imagine. It does not simply deliver the truth; it overwhelms us with it. This will become clearer as we examine the other metaphors in John 1:1–5, but not before we understand something of the context in which they occur.

V. *Life and Light in Relation to the Word*

Because life and light can only be understood in and are determined by their relationship to the Word, a few comments are in order before we further examine “words,” “life,” and “light” with a revelational approach to metaphor.

It seems apparent that John’s main intention in the Prologue is to introduce the subject of the Gospel, namely “(1) the relationship between God and the

⁴⁹ This also means we have a psycho-somatic view of language, which pairs with our psycho-somatic view of people, as *body-spirit* image bearers.

Word (Jesus); and (2) the possibility of a close relationship between God and human beings.⁵⁰ Relationship—that is John’s concern in the Prologue. In light of this, it would be best to understand “the Word” as conveying, firstly, the “intimate and unique relationship between the Father and the Son.”⁵¹ How exactly do we understand this relationship? Geerhardus Vos suggests that the Son as the Word signifies the Son’s rationale “inherent in the speaker,” as being the “imprint of [the speaker’s] personal existence,” and as tied to the speaker by living on in the speaker’s consciousness.⁵² In other words, the Son *as Word* is bound up with the Father as divine Speaker (and, we should add, with the breath or power used to produce it, i.e., the Spirit). The Son perfectly represents the intimate and personal presence of the Father as Speaker, and is never removed from the consciousness of that Speaker.⁵³ Secondly, we should understand “the Word” as conveying the truth that “the essence of life is a *relation to God*.”⁵⁴ Thus, when we have faith in the Word, this leads us “to a *relationship*, to the Person. Eternal life is in the knowledge of the Father and the Son (17:3), and whoever keeps the Father’s words will come to know the Son and believe in him, and will enter into a relationship with him (17:6–8).”⁵⁵ It is in relationship to this Word that we have life, which brings us to our next metaphorical expression.

1. *The Logos as Life*

In v. 4a we read, “In him was life.” How are we to understand “life” as residing *in* the Word? Casting this question in the light of the previous discussion, we seem compelled to affirm that life is in *relationship*. This goes against years of philosophical treatment of life and existence (ontology and metaphysics) as categorized by impersonal qualities or attributes. But if the Word, the relational person of the Son, is the origin of life, then existence itself cannot be

⁵⁰ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 361.

⁵¹ Maksimilijan Matjaz, “The Significance of the Logos in the Relational Aspect of John’s Theology,” in “*Perché Stessero Con Lui? Scritti in Onore Di Klemens Stock SJ, Nel Suo 75o Compleanno*, ed. Lorenzo De Santos and Santi Grasso (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2010), 302.

⁵² Geerhardus Vos, *Theology Proper*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), 57. Vos writes shortly before this that “the Word” is primarily designating who the Son is with respect to the Father, and only secondarily who the Son is with respect to us. I would grant Vos’s conclusion, but I would immediately add that these cannot be sundered from one another in John’s Gospel.

⁵³ This would fit under Lane Tipton’s discussion of the triune God as both a uni-conscious being and a tri-conscious being, a concept that originally came from the pen of Van Til. See Lane G. Tipton, “The Function of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility,” *WTJ* 64 (2002): 291–95; Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 348. The Son is never absent from the uni-consciousness of the Godhead.

⁵⁴ Matjaz, “Significance of the Logos,” 290.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 293.

impersonal. Life is found not in isolated enjoyment of breath and material, but in relationship—both with God and with other people.⁵⁶

This life is best understood in the context of v. 3, “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” The making of life, the bringing forth of creaturely existence, is inescapably relational, for at the dawn of their creation, every creature is bound in continuous relationship to the Word. Vos seems to have captured this decades ago. The Word did not create reality and leave: he remains and relates. In referencing John’s intentions for v. 3, Vos observes,

The writer does not look upon the production of the world through the Logos as a past fact, of which the significance and influence ceased with the moment of creation. It is a fact resulting in a *continuous relationship*, for only as such could it offer a reason why the world could and should, under normal conditions, have so known and received the Logos as is implied in both verse 10c and verse 11c. The bare fact that the Logos had a hand in the creation of the world would not of itself have made it easier for the world to know Him; this would result only if the origin of the world through the Logos established a perpetual relation of immanence in the world and proprietorship of the world.⁵⁷

In other words, the creation and giving of life itself presupposed relationship because it comes through the *Logos*. That is why discipleship is not merely a matter of epistemology. It is not *what* you know that makes you a disciple of the Word in the flesh; it is *who* you know. So it is quite natural for John to illustrate that discipleship is not a question “about Jesus’ teaching. It is him, his life and his concrete relations. The disciple is invited to a relationship with the Lord and nothing else but life with Him makes him a disciple.”⁵⁸ For the Word to have life *in himself* means that we cannot access life apart from him. Simply by being created (and later by being re-created) we partake in the life that belongs properly to him alone.⁵⁹ But it is difficult to realize this without the light of the knowledge of God, which is where we turn presently.

⁵⁶ Aristotelian philosophy has tended to treat ontology in abstraction, as substance and accidents. Aristotle’s categorical system provides the illusion of mastery: that we can know what a thing is exhaustively. But “no ‘ultimate’ system of abstract categories reaches down and makes transparent to human reason the foundations of human existence. That is because creation as a whole and every individual creature have their foundation in God’s plan, his commands, his governance, and his presence.” That presence is a personal presence. So how could life (i.e., existence) itself be impersonal? (Poynthress, *Redeeming Philosophy*, 137).

⁵⁷ Geerhardus Vos, “The Range of the Logos Title in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 89; italics added.

⁵⁸ Matjaz, “Significance of the Logos,” 294.

⁵⁹ “It is through the Logos that all things were made; it is also through the Logos, become flesh, that all things in redemption were accomplished” (Vos, “Range of the Logos Title,” 63).

2. *The Logos as Light*

So, the *Logos* has life in him, but, apart from the comments just made, what else can we say about that life? John tells us directly, “the life was the light of men.” At the outset, we must remember that this light is never independent from or received prior to a relationship with the Word. If a relationship were possible primarily through the light of knowledge, then that would open up the door to the heresy of Gnosticism. Instead, we settle with Vos: “The first thing associated with the *Logos*-name by the writer does not lie in the sphere of knowledge but in the sphere of power; the first characteristic *Logos*-product is life, not light.”⁶⁰

The light is accessed only through the life. And if that life comes in the form of relationship, would we expect the light to be isolated from this relational context? No, the light itself is tied to the relational context of life, both before the fall and after the fall. If we assume that light can be understood as “the knowledge of God,” then that light has always been with us. For this reason, we interpret v. 10 not as meaning that Christ was in the world by taking on flesh, but that he was *already in the world* before the incarnation as the life-imparting *Logos*, and this naturally fits the context of the following clause: “and the world was made through him.”⁶¹ This, Vos thinks, is one of the defining gifts of the Prologue.⁶² The light of the *Logos*, then, enters by two windows: the linguistically established natural world and the linguistically transmitted special knowledge of salvation in the one who shines in darkness.⁶³ In that light, we are able to find the source of life and have relationship with the God who speaks.

VI. *A Revelational Approach to Words, Life, and Light*

Now that we have a context for these concepts, we can more closely examine them with a revelational approach to metaphor, contrasting them with how tension theory might treat them. Earlier, we noted that God’s revelation has the ability to take the metaphors we have—the “second orbit satellites,” marginal uses of words that are tied to our physical experience or central uses of words—and reshape our understanding of them based on his Trinitarian primacy. In the Trinity we find the archetypal Word, Life, and Light. Creaturely words, life, and light must then be understood analogously and derivatively. Thus,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶¹ This interpretation should be fully credited to Vos. For details in the translation of the past tense verbs, see *ibid.*, 84.

⁶² “It not only vindicates for nature the character of a revealing medium through which God speaks, but also links together creation and redemption as both mediated by the same *Logos*” (*ibid.*, 90).

⁶³ Prickett notes that “the metaphor that Christ is the ‘light of the world’ changes not merely the way in which we are to understand Christ, but also the way we understand *light*” (Prickett, *Words and the Word*, 217).

the metaphors *word*, *life*, and *light* in John's Prologue primarily tell us about the second person of the Godhead, but they serve the secondary purpose of illuminating our understanding of our central and marginal uses of these terms.

1. *Words*

If the *Logos* is not "an impersonal force," but the personal presence of God himself in the Son, and if human words are analogous to the words God uses in creation and ultimately to "the Word" of John 1:1, then we must reject any impersonal definition of language or of linguistic units.⁶⁴ What are human "words" essentially? Are they "vehicles" of thought? Perhaps in some sense, but "vehicle" has mechanical and impersonal connotations. The nature of the *Logos* in John 1:1–5 would seem to call for words to be seen as units of communion. This is not to take away from their signifying function or their various uses in spoken and written discourse. Rather, by calling words "units of communion," I mean to reinforce that all communicative acts, and thus all of the units that comprise them, are ultimately bound up with relationships—the drawing together of persons, in a way that reflects how the Son, as Word, is inextricably bound up with the person of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Spoken and written language, then, as comprised of groups of words, is Trinitarian communion behavior.⁶⁵

Because of the revelational approach to metaphor, in which biblical metaphors recalibrate the central and marginal meanings of words on which they are based, we understand simple phrases and idioms in relation to this communion behavior. For example, we might consider the "central" or "marginal" uses of the term "word" in statements such as "his words were harsh," or "that is not the right word," and how these expressions might be reinterpreted in light of the revelation of the Word.⁶⁶ Harsh words are not simply "mean" or "derogatory"; they have potential to disrupt communion between persons. In the world of a communicative being, disruption of communion is a far more serious crime than haphazard derision. A revelational theory of metaphor here accents the weight of words—it is no light thing to break communion. Likewise, not having the "right word" is then not simply inaccurate, but fails to articulate

⁶⁴ Moisés Silva, "God, Language, and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics," in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 215; Poythress, "Reforming Ontology and Logic," 188.

⁶⁵ This follows Pike's understanding of language as "behavior," and of words as form-meaning composites. With regard to his tagmemic theory, Ruth Brend reminds us, "Besides emphasizing that language must be considered in its social context, tagmemics holds as a basic assumption that language, and human behavior in general, is purposeful and meaningful" (Ruth M. Brend and Kenneth L. Pike, eds., *Tagmemics, Vol. 1, Aspects of the Field* [The Hague: Mouton, 1976], 86).

⁶⁶ To start, we might say that "harsh" words are acts of disunion, not merely hurtful expressions. The "right" word is the word that fits the context and accurately signifies meaning so as to foster the process of communion.

the precise meaning that is required for the communion of minds, thus biblically recalibrating the axiom that accuracy is a standard of expression and a criterion for truth. As another example, in the context of communion behavior, the question “what words did you use?” can refer not merely to lexical choice but to the manner in which the words were spoken, thus shattering the false divide between matter and manner that so often plagues verbal and written discourse.⁶⁷ The wall between what we say and how we say it comes tumbling down with a revelational approach to words, for the original Word is more than a thing; the Word is a *person* who not only exists, but exists in a certain way.

Another implication of a revelational approach to the term “word” is our placement of language in relation to reality. Words are commonly relegated to the discipline of linguistics and semantics and only brought into discussions of metaphysics and ontology when they help clarify “non-linguistic” concepts. But if the Word is the one through whom all of creation was brought into existence, then language itself is fundamental to reality and cannot be divorced from any discipline, for the original Word not only accounts for human communication but has actualized the very reality in which communication occurs. This would mean that there is a linguistic underpinning to ontology, science, mathematics, sociology, geology, and so forth. Everything in creation can be understood through the window of the Word.

How does this approach to the term “word” compare with how it might be treated in tension theory? The true source of the tension in tension theory is its resistance to collapsing the subsidiary and principal subjects into one another, for that would allegedly result in absurdity. As mentioned earlier, tension theory would see “word” as the sign focus, “verbal communication” as subsidiary subject, and “the Son” as the principal subject, the tension between the latter two perhaps leading us to conclude that the Son is the embodied verbal revelation of the Father. But here we witness the tension of tension theory break down. *The Word as the Son of the Father is a special kind of metaphor because there is no tension between the subsidiary and principal subjects.* Certainly, we use a kind of stereoscopic vision to hold “Word” and “Son” in relationship without collapsing them into one another, but, contrary to tension theory, collapsing them into one another (the Son *is* God’s speech) would not result in absurdity. Perhaps proponents of tension theory would then say that this was not a “vital metaphor.”⁶⁸ But that avoids the issue. It seems, theologically speaking, that in some cases we are meant to collapse the subsidiary and principal subjects into one another for

⁶⁷ T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), 43.

⁶⁸ “Where a reduction of the metaphor’s cognitive import to non-tensional statements is possible, whether in practice or in principle, then the metaphor is not what I choose to call a vital one” (Berggren, “The Use and Abuse of Metaphor 1,” 244). Berggren would perhaps view the metaphor of the Son as the Word of the Father to be a “non-vital” metaphor, but theological metaphors require special treatment, for absurdity itself must be understood based on the premise of God’s revelation.

particular purposes. In this case, perhaps one of those purposes is the realization that God always speaks his Son.⁶⁹ He spoke him in eternity past, and, as Vos stated above, he spoke him in time at the moment of creation and unwaveringly throughout history. So, the creation of the world through the *Logos* is “a fact resulting in a continuous relationship.” God has not removed himself from the world; he is ever revealed, always communicating with it. The tension, then, is not between the subsidiary and principal subjects of John’s metaphor; the real tension is between sinful and restored vision of the same reality. Sinful vision refuses to accept the continual, perspicuous revelation of God in created reality and in Scripture—both of which are products of God’s speech, products of the Word. Restored vision sees no tension between the Son and the Word because God’s speech is creative and redemptive. In this case, the tension of tension theory would preclude us from unearthing a theological gem.

2. *Life*

Following the previous example, how might we re-interpret the central and marginal uses of the word “life”? Looking to the Trinity for the archetypal understanding of *life*, we would first say that life cannot be sundered from the second person of the Trinity. Life is *in him*, not outside of him. True life, then, is a relationship with the Trinity, not a collection of synapses and biological potentialities. There are many people with biological life who suffer from a lack of relationship. Do such people truly have life, or are they living an illusion, as the walking dead (Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13)? We only have “life,” properly speaking, *in the Word*.

If the Word has life *in himself*, then life is not, as stated before, an impersonal category or quality. Life is at all times and places relational—first to the Word who produced it, and second to the creatures who share it. When I say, “my dog’s life,” I do not mean to express a chain of time encapsulating his animate existence. I mean that he has Logos-given existence and relates both to God’s creational Word and to the Word of redemption, which is making all things new (Rev 21:5). The phrase “my dog’s life” connotes a relationship, with his environment and with our family. Life never occurs in a vacuum. It exists in a web of relations. So, “life” is never merely breath.

⁶⁹ I say “one of those purposes” because we must also guard ourselves against treating this “collapse” of the subsidiary and principal subjects reductionistically, as if all metaphors reduce to a single meaning in a platonic sense. Metaphors (in fact, many of the features of human language) are *prismatic*—their facets are not meant to be reduced to a single plane but to be appreciated in their rich, n-dimensional diversity. This is so because our perception (and the language we use to express it) is n-dimensional, that is, it has more than three or four dimensions to it. See Kenneth L. Pike, *Taxmemics, Discourse, and Verbal Art*, Michigan Studies in the Humanities 3 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1981), 18. Largely due to the influence of Plato and Aristotle, we are always struggling to exchange richness for reduction. The former is not a threat to the stability of meaning, but a complement to it and a testament to the incomprehensibility of the Trinitarian God.

This, again, recalibrates our central and marginal uses of the word “life.” Consider the expression, “Get a life.” While it is often used merely to relay an insult (“do something productive” or “stop meddling in someone else’s affairs”), we cannot exclude the divine meaning of “life” when we hear such expressions. A true life is a life of relationship with the triune God, so to “get” a life means that there is discord in an interpersonal relationship—discord that is ultimately rooted in discord in a divine-human relationship. We must resist the urge to treat problems as purely sociological, assuming that changes in social behavior will help someone “get a life.” Matters of the heart are always involved. Getting a life must be situated within a divine-human relationship before sociological behaviors can be modified.

For the Word to have life in himself is for us to have life primarily in him. When we are estranged from him, there is a deep sense in which we are not *alive*. It is for this reason that Paul can refer to people as being *dead* in sins and trespasses (Eph 2:1; Col 2:13). Life *is* in relationship with the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Spirit. All of biological life serves that end. Any understanding of “life” that attempts to supersede this relational understanding is, in fact, misconstruing the biblical use of the term.

Tension theory, again, would be limited here. Setting aside, for now, the added complication that the preposition *in* (“in him was life”) has a broad semantic range and includes various metaphorical senses, we would have “life” as the sign focus, “existence” as the subsidiary subject, and “the Word” as the principal subject, the tension between these subjects leading us to affirm something like, “the Word is the source of existence.” This is certainly true, but not nearly rich enough an understanding, and again, the collapsing of these subjects does not end in absurdity.

In terms of richness, while we certainly affirm that the Word is the source of existence, we must be quick to add that the Word also sustains existence. All of reality is still upheld by the word of God’s power (Heb 1:3). God did not speak reality into existence and walk away, as Vos has already shown. He stayed. The Word is responsible for the origin and the continuance of earthly life, all of which is destined one day to bow the knee and confess that Christ is Lord (Phil 2:10–11). Until that day, the Word is *with us*, even to the end of the age (Matt 28:20). There is not only a *source* of life; there is a *relationship* of life.

In terms of the tension between the subsidiary and principal subjects, if we collapse “Word” and “life” into one another, we do not end up with absurdity (that the speech of God is alive); we end up with, at the very least, another biblical truth, “for the word of God is living and active” (Heb 4:12).⁷⁰ God’s word is not simply propositional; it *does* things.⁷¹ Perhaps most importantly, it pierces the

⁷⁰ See the previous note on the prismatic nature of biblical metaphors.

⁷¹ This goes beyond the limits of speech-act theory, though the latter can be helpful when understood biblically, as Vanhoozer’s work has illustrated. For the limitations of speech-act theory, see Vern S. Poythress, “Canon and Speech Act: Limitations in Speech-Act Theory, with Implications for a Putative Theory of Canonical Speech Acts,” *WTJ* 70 (2008): 337–54.

soul, “discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). Without such piercing we cannot truly have life, since life is a relationship with the Word.

3. *Light*

Light provides an interesting application for a revelational theory of metaphor, since the term is so typically associated with physicality. But yet again, taking the Trinity for our archetypal understanding, we first say that light, as it is bound to the life of the Word, cannot be divorced from its relational context. Light, especially if taken to mean knowledge, is the arena of relationship. God knows himself exhaustively. He is a light unto himself.⁷² And only in him do we know ourselves, because the relational life we have with God is “the light of men” (John 1:4). Our light is not self-referential knowledge but relational knowledge of the Triune God. Only in his light do we see light (Ps 36:9). All that is to say John 1:1–5 reveals that the life of the Word precedes the light that we have *in him*, a light that both illumines ourselves and the God with whom we are meant to have communion.

When we seek light, that is, knowledge, without recourse to our personal relationship with God or with others, is it really light that we are after? And when we see physical light, do we think of it in the context of a relational life, or do we do the opposite? Do we think that life only occurs in physical light, or that light exists to serve our relational life with God? I would suggest that the relational nature of light means that we use physical light, and the metaphorical light of knowledge, only in conscious service of relationships, for true light is relational: it comes about in the relationship we have to the creative and redemptive Word of God.

Again, we let this reshape our central and marginal uses of the word “light.” The expression “the light of knowledge,” frequently referenced by rationalists and Enlightenment philosophers, may have been understood as a set of propositional truths or a system of logic, but the biblical light of knowledge goes far deeper. We do not *possess* knowledge so much as *live in accordance with it*. Knowledge is not merely attained; it is sustained and sustaining in relationship with the life we have in the Word. To know something truly, in this sense, is to act on it with regard to relationships in reality.⁷³

⁷² The light that God is surrounded by before the creation of earthly light is a kind of self-referential light based upon which he creates earthly light. See Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 61; Jacob Milgrom, “The Alleged ‘Hidden Light,’” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman (Boston: Brill, 2004), 44; Mark S. Smith, “Light in Genesis 1:3—Created or Uncreated: A Question of Priestly Mysticism,” in *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Chaim Cohen et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 1:127–31.

⁷³ This could be related to Leonard Bloomfield’s notion of meaning—which is certainly a part of knowledge—as a situation of speaking and response, or to Wittgenstein’s understanding of

Physical light is a glorious reflection of Trinitarian light. When we light a candle, turn on a light, or see the sun rise, we are presented with a world of relations that calls for our engagement. Light allows us to function in reality for the sake of accenting and drawing others to its attendant life. How paradoxical it is, then, when we walk into a lit room and insult another person; or when we offer to pray for someone and then blow out a candle and leave her alone (I am guilty on both counts). The light we have is meant to serve the life we were given. All light is not merely phenomenal. It is more than photons. It is always purposively bound up with the life of the Word.

Tension theory, again, while helpful in pointing out that we use stereoscopic vision to hold the “life” and “light” in view at the same time, cannot account for the relational meaning that is conveyed by the metaphor. Light is not to be understood in tension with life, but as bound up with it. We can collapse the subsidiary subject (physical light) into the principal subject (existence) and end up not with an absurdity (light is the sustenance of human existence), but with a community: physical light, as a derivation of the light of God’s knowledge, is meant to sustain and serve the relational life of human existence. The Trinitarian God, who has life and light in himself, has condescended and extended that life and light in creation. Our light *is* his life, and our life is *in* his light.

VII. *Conclusion and Implications*

One of the strengths of a revelational theory of metaphor is that it is loose enough to account for the richness of biblical truth. Rather than trap ourselves within a particular, univocal understanding of metaphor, we can draw on the various approaches to metaphor, such as tension theory, as they are informed by special revelation. As promised in the introduction, a revelational approach shows how Scripture illuminates our central and marginal uses of words through the metaphors it offers. Our case study of John 1:1–5 is just one passage among many. Admittedly, these metaphors have a special potency because they are related to the Son of God, not just any element of creation. Nevertheless, the principle would be the same with other passages of Scripture, since the Bible always recalibrates our understanding of reality. There is no part of language that is not affected by our reception of revelation, so we must continue to explore the implications of revelation for language. We are, after all, just like Nicodemus. Being born of water and the Spirit means that, in our growing faith, we continue to work out the implications of a Word-made world.

In ending, perhaps our greatest discovery thus far is that our central and marginal uses of words are not properly understood apart from the Trinitarian,

meaning as use in context, or, in Frame’s language, meaning as an expression of God-ordained use, i.e., understanding and responsible use. See John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013), 660–61; Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 95–97.

revelational context of Scripture, and that all words, many of which seem to be embedded in physical reality, have a spiritual source that runs deeper than we can imagine. The mystery of the self-communing Trinity, once again, challenges us to see all of language as a divinely endowed, derivative behavior. Metaphor, it seems, does more than build bridges between concepts; it builds the bridge between divine and human communication.

