

IN DIVINE COMPANY



Growing Closer to the God Who Speaks

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GROWING CLOSER TO THE GOD WHO SPEAKS

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For anyone who has ever felt distant from God

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Introduction

I have heard that God is everywhere.
I have heard that God is near.
But my question is a simpler one:
How can I feel him *here*?

* * *

This is a little book about a big problem. It's a perennial problem, a daily problem, a moment-by-moment problem: *our feeling distant from God*.

Some years ago, my wife and I were paging through a book entitled *Post Secret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives*. It's a collection of postcards sent anonymously to the author, each with a confession. The entries range from common to bizarre to inappropriate and flat out incriminating. But one of them has always stuck with me, partly because it nearly brought us to tears. With simple sincerity, the person had written the following confession: "I miss feeling close to God." Could you write the same? I believe all of us could at one time or another.

Now, let me settle something up front. Our relationship with God is not based on *feelings*. Feelings are often fickle and even misleading. I can offer an example from my own life. I've struggled with an anxiety disorder for over a decade. Many of the feelings that I experience (hypervigilance, doubt, distrust, and a myriad of physical symptoms) nearly convince me of things that I *know* are not true: that I'm alone, that I'm on death's door, that I'm helpless and abandoned. But the God of truth runs far deeper than our feelings. He stays the same (James 1:17), even when everything around us seems to be spiraling into chaotic change. Feelings are *not* final; our faith in the truth *is*, because that truth is an eternal person (John 14:6) whose work cannot be undone (Rom. 8:31–39).

At the same time, our feelings are not irrelevant either. God uses everything we experience to conform us to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:28–29). So, we shouldn't ignore them. Instead, we should measure them against the rod of Scripture and prayerfully discern what they can tell us about the state of our soul and about the spiritual war in which we find ourselves each day.

In this book, however, I'm thinking not merely about feelings in general, but a specific feeling: *the feeling that we are spiritually distant from God*. Now, maybe you've felt spiritually close to God before. Maybe, as with most of us, your spiritual closeness to God has gone through peaks and valleys. Or maybe you've *never* felt close to God. No matter what your situation has been or is, this

little book is for you because all of us long to be close to God. It's our deepest desire because it's at the core of our identity as human beings.

Diagnosing the Problem

Let me start by offering a few words about diagnosis. As with any problem, the diagnosis controls the treatment; the *what* of our condition controls the *how* of our response. A misdiagnosis will lead to ineffective or potentially hazardous treatment. A physical example draws this out clearly. If I have flu-like symptoms, I might be diagnosed with a strain of the flu. My treatment would involve rest, an uptake in fluids, and perhaps some Tylenol. But what if my flu-like symptoms were really caused by a tumor putting pressure on my brain stem? (This happened to my late father when he was in his thirties.) The treatment would be drastically different, calling for surgery, radiation or chemo therapy, and a list of other medications. Clearly, in physical situations, the *what* of our condition controls the *how* of our response.

The *what* of our condition controls the *how* of our response.

The same is the case in spiritual situations. Unfortunately, in the realm of spirituality, many of us have a pitiable history of misdiagnosing ourselves (or perhaps not letting God do the diagnosing), especially when it comes to our feeling distant from God. For starters, rather than confronting the symptom and searching for a treatment, we seek to avoid or deny it. "I'm not really distant from God; this is just how everyone feels." "I'm just in a funk; I've missed church the last two weeks." "I've been focusing too much on myself lately; I need to find someone else to help. Then I'll feel better." The list goes on and on. Some of these might be true, but they also might be our attempts to sidestep the symptom. If the symptom is there, call your attention to it: "I feel distant from God." Say it out loud. Pull the words out of your soul and let them meet the open air. It might be painful and disconcerting, but we have to start there.

Second, once we acknowledge the symptom, we misdiagnose the problem. The diagnosis is meant to explain what's causing the symptoms, and it suggests how we treat them. If the symptom is feeling distant from God, we must first answer the obvious question embedded *in* the symptom: *am* I distant from God? *Are* my thoughts and behaviors significantly affected by my personal relationship with him, or am I living as a pragmatic atheist? Can I even say that I *have* a personal

relationship with God? If I can say that I do, am I maintaining it or just letting it float off into the background? Be honest. Even if it's embarrassing, be candid. Because your answer to these questions could be pointing you to the diagnosis that I'll discuss here. For now, let's call it *communicative malnourishment* (CM for short). More on that in a moment.

If we attribute the symptom to something *other* than our spiritual distance from God when that is, in fact, what's causing the feeling, then that will change our treatment and affect the long-term result. Say, for example, that I attribute my feeling distant from God to a chemical imbalance, perhaps a moderate form of depression. For many people, the next step in treatment is consulting with a physician about medication. If the problem lies in the body, then a bodily treatment should do the trick. In fact, you may end up feeling a bit better; perhaps you think about your disconcerting distance from God far less frequently. But the problem hasn't gone away; it's just been quieted. The true cause of the symptom (the problem) remains. And here's the bad news: the symptom will eventually resurface—not because the medication wasn't effective but because the medicine simply wasn't designed to address the problem that you actually have.

Let me say it again: the *what* of our condition controls the *how* of our response. The treatment is always paired with the diagnosis.

One of the most prevalent causes of our feeling distant from God is communicative malnourishment.

In this book, I'm going to suggest that one of the most prevalent causes of our feeling distant from God is *communicative malnourishment* (CM for short). I understand this to be an illness of the soul that results from (1) not hearing *from* God and (2) not speaking *with* God. The treatment that I want to explore with you is predictable, I think, but I hope to look at it in fresh ways: (1) following God's voice in Scripture and listening to what the world is saying about him (hearing *from* God), and (2) praying to the Trinity (speaking *with* God).

Why I Wrote This Book and How You Can Use It

Now, let me be transparent with you. I wrote this little book not because I feel so close to God that I think I have a lesson to offer, but because I'm just like you: I want to feel close to God,

too. I live in the same distracting, noise-infused world that you do. I crave a sense of God's presence just as much as anyone. And yet, I know that we can't chase after a *feeling*. As creatures made in God's image, we are custom-built to chase after a *relationship*, a relationship with the Trinity. And this relationship is not all about sentiment; it's about sovereignty, love, and language. But when you put those things together, the sentiment tends to follow. That's what I hope to show you.

I opened this chapter with a little poem (and do the same for the following chapters). Let me break all the rules of reading poetry and explain what I mean by it.

I have heard that God is everywhere.
I have heard that God is near.
But my question is a simpler one:
How can I feel him *here*?

Many of us have heard about the doctrine of God's omnipresence: that God is everywhere. We cannot see God or hear an audible voice, but we've been taught since our youth that God is everywhere. It's quite different, however, to say that God is *with me*. To say that God is everywhere is *propositional*; to say that he is with me is *personal*. And that's what the last line is getting at: we want to sense God's presence *with us*. We want to feel as if we're not alone, as if God is really *here*, because we know that he is.

You can best use this book as a conversation starter—not necessarily between you and others (though I hope that happens too), but between you and God. God, after all, is the one you're after, the one with whom you long to grow closer. To that end, I have provided some prayerful discussion questions that you might use to get the conversation going. Feel free to adapt them or discard them based on your preferences. I offer them as suggestions.

Before we get into the modest content ahead of us, let me be direct with you: this little book isn't meant to be something you *read*; it's meant to be something you *do*. For anything in these pages to be effective, action will be required: routines will need to be created or changed, thought patterns will need to be redeemed by biblical hope, behaviors will need to be shaped by divine speech. Growing closer to God is not an exercise in cognition; it's an exercise in spiritual formation. If you read this book and change nothing in your life, then either I have failed as a writer or you have failed as a responsive reader. All authors hope their readers will change as a result of reading their work. I want to be forthright in saying that *change* is the most important measure of value for this book. So, I encourage you to read and grow, not merely to read and know.

Growing closer to God is not an exercise in cognition; it's an exercise in spiritual formation.

Here's how the book is organized. First, I want to talk about who God is. Then I want to lay out who we are in relation to God. Then I'll introduce language as *communion behavior* so that we can apply this to (1) our reception of God's revelation (hearing *from* God) and (2) our response to that revelation in prayer (speaking *with* God). I'll end with some comments about the practicality of God's spoken presence with us, along with a call to believe that we are always in divine company.

Discussion Questions

1. Would you say that you currently feel close to God? Why or why not?
2. Think of a moment when you felt close to God and describe it. What was happening? How were you responding?
3. Do you find it difficult to hear from God or speak to him? If so, why? What do you think keeps people from feeling close to God?

The Speaking God

God is the source of dialogue,
The one who utters most.
He is the holy triologue
Of Father, Son, and Ghost.

* * *

Who is God? There's no question more basic. It's a question as relevant to us as it was to our fathers, to our fathers' fathers—back beyond remembrance. We must be very careful how we answer, not just because we're talking about the Lord of all things but because our answer will shape how we interact with him.

At the outset, we must admit our limitations, and say that we can't really define God; we can only describe him.¹ There are many descriptors that theologians have used throughout history, but in this book, I'm going to focus on the phrase *communicative Spirit*. The first word gets at the trinitarian nature of God; the second gets at his essence.

Let's begin with God's essence. God is a Spirit (John 4:24; WCF 2.1). So, many of the adjectives and states we attribute to persons cannot be attributed to him. He has no body, no flesh and blood, no concrete form in space.² We cannot sense him physically. He is, in older terminology, incorporeal. For many people today, that's enough to convince them that God is a fairy tale, an outdated myth that needs to be cast off in light of modern thinking. How can we acknowledge and claim to have a relationship with an invisible, three-personed Spirit?

I have a terse answer to that question: *because God is not mute*. God is a communicative being who speaks with himself in three persons and speaks to his creation by way of revelation. This communicative nature of God is utterly critical. The moment we say God does not speak in any recognizable sense is the moment we throw our theology in the wastebasket, along with any hope of relationship. Speech is at the core of who God is, and it's how we come to know him.

Why do I say this? The fact that God is a Spirit means that nearly all our typical means of having a relationship with him are off the table. In human relationships, corporeality is assumed. When I say hello to my wife, it's assumed that I can see, hear, or touch her. For the most part, my relationship with her demands concrete physicality. Yet, we cannot have this with God as Spirit.

¹ Geerhardus Vos, *Theology Proper*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012), 1.

² I am for the moment holding off on a discussion of the Incarnation.

While we can sense his presence with us (Gen. 28:16; 2 Chr. 13:12; Isa. 8:10), that's very different from the way in which we sense the presence of other persons.

**Speech is at the core of who God is,
and it's how we can have any hope
of knowing him.**

There's really only one way in which we can have a relationship with a Spirit, and it just so happens that this way is central to who God is and to who we are: speech, language. If we are to have a relationship with a Spirit, there must be communication of some sort from that Spirit, and it must be possible for us to communicate with him. In other words, there must be divine-human dialogue. But for there to be genuine divine-human dialogue, God must be *essentially* communicative; there must be divine-divine dialogue (or, we might say "trialogue"). For our relationship with God to be authentic and eternal, God must relate to us in a way that suits his own unchanging character. And he has, for God speaks to himself in three persons! As my friend and teacher once wrote,

The New Testament indicates that the persons of the Trinity speak to one another. . . . Not only is God a member of a language community that includes human beings, but the persons of the Trinity function as members of a language community among themselves. Language does not have as its sole purpose human-human communication, or even divine-human communication, but also divine-divine communication.³

We know that this divine self-communication or speech is part of God's essence because Scripture makes that plain to us. As John Frame has summarized, speech is an essential attribute of God for at least the following reasons:

1. Throughout Scripture, God is distinguished from idols because he *speaks* (he is not dumb or mute).
2. Throughout the New Testament, the Father is portrayed as the divine speaker, the Son as his Word, and the Spirit as his breath.
3. God's speech has divine attributes such as righteousness, faithfulness, eternity, and truth.

³ Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 18. Evidence for this comes from many passages of Scripture, but notably John 1:1–3; 16:13–15; and Jesus's high priestly prayer in John 17.

4. God’s word is an object of worship.
5. God’s word is his self-expression.⁴

As an essential divine attribute—something that is part of God’s unchanging character—speech opens the door for our communion with God as Spirit.

Another way of putting this would be to say that for us to have a communicative relationship with God, he must have a communicative relationship with himself. He must speak with himself if he is to speak with us. The primary reason for this is that if God did not speak with himself, then when he spoke to us he would be using a medium that doesn’t represent the fullness of who he is. We would not, in that sense, *really* be engaging with God as he is.

For us to have a communicative relationship with God, he must have a communicative relationship with himself.

So, God is a Spirit who communicates with himself, and that’s what sets the stage for him communicating with us. That, in short, is what I mean by saying that God is a *communicative Spirit*. But this naturally leads to other questions.

In What Sense Does God Speak?

Most people would immediately ask, firstly, how God speaks to himself, and, secondly, how he speaks to us. Regarding the latter, we don’t hear a divine voice as we walk through the grocery store aisles, nor do many people come home at the end of the day and say, “God, let me tell you about what happened at work.” What sort of speech are we talking about when we say that God speaks to us? We’ll take up that question in the later chapters. For this chapter, let’s focus on the way in which God speaks with himself.

God speaks with himself in a language of *love* and *glory*. The persons of the Godhead “speak” to each other in the sense that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit express love and glory toward one

⁴ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 522.

another without end. We can safely infer this from what we know about God in the New Testament.

The Father expresses love toward the Son and shows him all that he does (John 5:20). The Son expresses love toward the Father and obeys his commands to perfection, just as he instructs his followers to do (John 14:15, 21, 23). And Paul's ode to holy love (1 Cor. 13:1–13) is bound to the third person of the Trinity as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), who expresses love toward the Father and the Son. As Abraham Kuyper put it, “the Love-life whereby these Three mutually love each other is the Eternal Being Himself. . . . The entire Scripture teaches that nothing is more precious and glorious than the Love of the Father for the Son, and of the Son for the Father, and of the Holy Spirit for both.”⁵

The persons of the Trinity also speak to one another in a language of glory. In John 17:5 Jesus says, “glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” In the preceding chapter, he proclaimed that the Spirit also glorifies him (John 16:14). So, the Son certainly receives glory from the Father and the Spirit, and yet Jesus tells us that he longs for the Father to glorify him so that he can glorify the Father (John 17:1). And the reason the Son is glorified is that he gives life to all men who are dead in sins and trespasses (Rom. 6:11), and this life is none other than “the Spirit of life” (Rom. 8:2, 6), who is the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). Therefore, we can say that the Spirit shares in the glory of the Son as life-giver.

This divine exchange of love and glory is the highest form of communication: it is a holy and eternal triologue fostering unbroken fellowship, and it can be such precisely because the persons are distinct and yet united: one essence in three persons.

This eternal language of love and glory is what I have in mind when I say that God eternally “speaks” to himself. It is language of a higher order. Some have seen fit to call it “a type of language.”

Interacting with God

Now, if God is a *communicative Spirit* who speaks with himself in a language of love and glory, then this tells us how we're going to interact with him as creatures made in his image (Gen. 1:27). We're going to interact with God through language, which is what I call *communion behavior*. This should bring to mind what we noted earlier: that in order to grow closer to God, we must both

⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henry De Vries (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1995), 542.

speak *to* him and hear *from* him. And we can do this because we are made in God's speaking image. That takes us to the next chapter.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important to know who God is?
2. Why is it difficult for people to engage with God as a Spirit?
3. Is it comforting to know that speech is an essential attribute of God? Why or why not?
4. Does viewing God as a communicative Spirit change the way you might talk about God with non-Christians? If so, how?

His Speaking Creatures

He *said* that we might *say*.
He spoke that we might hear.
But we fall into disarray
With a sinful tongue and ear.

* * *

I have suggested that God is a *communicative Spirit* and that language is central to who God is. It's also central to who we are. When God made us, he created us in his image. What does that mean, exactly?

There are many answers to that question. Most commonly, theologians have said that we image God in our ability to know things, to act morally, and to be holy. We also image God in the sense that we are *relational*. God relates to himself in three divine persons; we relate to each other as separate, created persons. There is a large gap between what we mean by “person” with reference to God verses ourselves, but there is also overlap. We rely on that overlap to engage with God.

Yet, I believe there's a simpler take on what it means for us to be made in the image of God. Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949) put it this way: “That man bears God's image means much more than that he is spirit and possesses understanding, will, etc. It means above all that he is disposed for communion with God, that all the capacities of his soul can act in a way that corresponds to their destiny only if they rest in God.”¹ “Disposed for communion”—that's the phrase I want us to think about for a moment. We are creatures made for interpersonal *communion* with the Trinity: that's what it means to be made in God's image. We long for communion with this three-personed, communicative Spirit.

**We are creatures made for
interpersonal communion with the
Trinity: that's what it means to be
made in God's image.**

¹ Geerhardus Vos, *Anthropology*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2014), 13.

Now, how do we have communion with a communicative Spirit? We communicate! We use language. Language is what binds us in relationship with God: we hear him speak (in Scripture) and we speak back (in prayer). It is for this reason that I consider language to be *communion behavior*. Let me explain what I mean by this.²

Language as Communion Behavior

As the previous chapter introduced, I believe that language is (1) an interpersonal, trinitarian behavior amongst the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whereby they express mutual and intimate love and glory towards one another; (2) an image-bearing human behavior that has the goal of (a) drawing persons into fellowship with God and (b) drawing persons into fellowship with each other. Communion behavior can be either verbal or nonverbal. Verbal communion behavior would be the use of written or spoken language to foster communion or fellowship between God and humanity or between human persons. Nonverbal communion behavior would be any other communicative behaviors (aside from written and spoken language) that serve the purpose of drawing people into more intimate fellowship with God or with each other. This view of language makes sense, given that “one of the purposes of language—in fact, a central, predominant purpose—is to be a vehicle for personal communication and communion between God and human beings.”³

Now, language, as communion behavior, must be understood on two levels. First, communion behavior is something that can be properly ascribed to the Trinity. As we already noted, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mutually love and glorify one another in perpetuity.⁴ This mutual expression of love and glory among the divine persons is a kind of language, though it certainly surpasses our understanding as limited creatures, and we have to keep a few things in mind when we think of communion behavior on the creaturely level. For starters, as I’ve written elsewhere, we use communion behavior to grow closer together to God and one another, but God simply *is* communion. The divine persons do not need to grow closer to one another because they are perfectly united in one essence. Also, while the divine persons love and glorify one another eternally, our goal in using language is not to glorify one another, but to glorify God.

² For an introduction to language as communion behavior, see *The Speaking Trinity & His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, forthcoming). You can also reference “Closing the Gaps: Perichoresis and the Nature of Language,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 78, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 299–322; and “Words for Communion,” *Modern Reformation* 25, no. 4 (August 2016): 5–8.

³ Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 38.

⁴ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 522–23.

Second, communion behavior is an image-bearing behavior. It is something God has endowed us with as creatures made in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:27). That’s why language, for me, pairs well with Vos’s understanding of the image of God. Communion behavior (language) is at the center of our being “disposed for communion” with the Father, Son, and Spirit. In other words, we use communion behavior because we are creatures built for communion with the self-communing God.

Now, I said before that this is a little book about a big problem. So let’s get back to that problem, our feeling distanced from God. I believe that this feeling is often the effect of what I called *communicative malnourishment* or CM. CM can be understood as a pattern or habit of (a) not hearing the voice of the communicative Trinity in Scripture and (b) not addressing God in prayer. In other words, CM is a problem in our use of communion behavior. When we don’t hear God’s voice or speak to him in prayer, we become spiritually feeble and anemic. We feel isolated from God, surrounded by a dull spiritual silence, like a lone flower in the desert, unmoved by the wind.

CM can be understood as a pattern or habit of (a) not hearing the voice of the communicative Trinity in Scripture and (b) not addressing God in prayer.

CM is a problem that every Christian encounters from time to time. No one has a perfect devotional or prayer life, so all of us are susceptible to contracting this illness. The good news is that there is an unchanging cure. You and I don’t have to live with CM indefinitely. We don’t have to feel distanced from God forever. We can recover the vitality of our relationship with God and grow closer to him. The medicine, as you might guess, is found in our use of communion behavior (language). The next two chapters suggest what this looks like more specifically.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways do you think we are made in God’s image and likeness?
2. How might it help to view language as communion behavior?
3. What challenges face you in using communion behavior to engage with God?

Communion Behavior Applied: Revelation

God spoke a world that speaks to us;
He makes his greatness heard.
Matter and time, from dawn to dusk,
Stands strong upon his Word.

* * *

This chapter addresses the first part of CM: our failure to hear the voice of the Trinity. To understand the nature of this problem, we have to know something about *revelation*. Theologians distinguish two types of revelation: general and special. I want to suggest that God “speaks” through both, albeit in different senses.

God’s Speech in General Revelation

General revelation, sometimes called natural revelation, is typically understood as “the knowledge that God conveys to human beings through nature. It is also called *general revelation* because it comes to all mankind and through all the experiences of human life.”¹ Herman Bavinck writes,

Throughout the Bible we are taught a general revelation. God’s revelation began in creation and continues in the maintenance and governance of all things. He reveals himself in nature all around us, displays in it his eternal power and divinity, and in blessings and judgments alternately shows this goodness and wrath (Job 36; 37; Ps. 29; 33:5; 65; 67:7; 90; 104; 107; 145; 147; Isa. 59:17–19; Matt. 5:45; Rom. 1:18; Acts 14:16–17). He reveals himself in the history of nations and persons (Deut. 32:8; Ps. 33:10; 67:4; 115:16; Prov. 8:15, 16; Acts 17:26; Rom. 13:1). He also discloses himself in the heart and conscience of every individual (Job 32:8; 33:4; Prov. 20:27; John 1:3–5, 9, 10; Rom. 2:14, 15; 8:16.²

General revelation encompasses every particle of God’s creation. There is no part of God’s world that does not reveal something of his character. The breadth of this revelation is captured by Paul in Romans 1 when he says that God’s eternal power and divine nature have been clearly revealed simply “in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20)—that is, in everything.

¹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 537.

² Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 310.

It is in this sense that all of reality “speaks” about God. All of creation has something to say about the character of its maker. My favorite text in this regard is Psalm 19:1–4.

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

We live in what I have called a *worded world*, a world that everywhere reveals something about the God who made it, a world that, in a sense, “speaks” about God. And here’s the most gripping part of it all: the speech never stops. God is *always* speaking to his image bearers through what he has made. This is not the same way in which God speaks to us in Scripture, since it is not a direct verbal address. But it is nevertheless true. Creation speaks.

We live in what I have called a *worded world*, a world that everywhere reveals something about the God who made it, a world that, in a sense, “speaks” about God.

The trick, of course, is learning to interpret it, to hear it. How can we interpret the “speech” of general revelation? For starters, we have to look at creation through the lens of special revelation (Scripture) in order to interpret it faithfully. Apart from the saving revelation of Christ, we’re all blind. We won’t see God in creation, but neither will we see anything else, because we’ve not been given the eyes to see it (Isa. 6:9–10; Matt. 13:15–16). Once we have been given new eyes by the work of the Spirit, we can take any part of the world and trust that God is revealing a host of things about himself there, even his triune nature.

How the World Speaks of God

Take, for example, the old American Beech trees that grow outside one of the buildings where I work. These trees are strong and stable; their roots spread out hundreds of feet, gripping the earth. On windy days, their tops, soaring eighty feet into the air, bend and turn. Yet, the enormous trunks keep each tree in place. I've knocked on the base of one with my knuckles, feeling its hardness. Each tree is a piece of the world, a *particle*, we might say. Each one is a definite thing.³

Yet, each tree is also still growing, aging, and changing. Nutrients still work their way into the pith (or heart) of each tree. The rain and sunlight continue to affect the soil and leaves. At the very tops of some of the trees, there is a limb or two that is bare and dying (for trees die from the top down). Each tree ages with the passing of dawn, daylight, and dusk. And throughout the seasons, the leaves will change colors, fall to the ground, and new leaves will emerge through buds as spring follows a cold, white winter. Each tree is not just a particle (a piece of the world), but a *wave*. Each one is active and dynamic, ever moving.

Lastly, each of the beech trees has a relationship with its surroundings. The roots of each tree are woven throughout the homes of worms and other insects that reside in the soil. Each tree provides a series of homes or shelters for small animals such as squirrels and orioles. Each tree gives off oxygen when it uses energy from sunlight to produce glucose from carbon dioxide and water. So, each tree contributes to the surrounding atmosphere. Each one is part of a *field* of things, a network of relationships.

The particle, wave, and field perspectives that we have just used for these beech trees are all present simultaneously. Through each perspective, we perceive each tree as a particle, wave, and field, but we might choose a different perspective at any given moment. The three perspectives are of the one tree.

Where do these perspectives come from? Some people might say, "Well, humans just made them up. We all can choose how we see the world. Why bother asking how we have come to see it in a certain way?" I guess I'm more curious, and maybe you are, too. Like a child, I want to know *why*. Because all of creation "speaks" of God, we can ask why these perspectives exist and what they reveal about God's character.

³ The particle, wave, and field perspectives were introduced by Kenneth L. Pike in *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). They have been linked to the Trinity by Vern Poythress in *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 56–59.

In general, they exist to reveal something about God (Rom. 1) and to glorify him as part of creation (Ps. 19:1–4). Atheists and agnostics would disagree, but they will not have an answer as to why such things exist because their worldview has no room for a purposeful, communicative Spirit. In terms of what they reveal about God’s character, I believe they reveal God’s trinitarian nature.

The particle perspective—our ability to see each element in the world as a discrete thing—is rooted in God the Father, who is stable and immoveable. In him, says James, there is no “variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). The stability and discreteness we see in the world is a reflection of the ultimate stability and sovereignty of the Father.

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The wave perspective—our ability to see each element in the world as active and dynamic—is rooted in God the Son, who is ever living and active as the eternal Word of the Father (John 1:1; Heb. 4:12). All movement is reflective of him.⁴

The field perspective—our ability to see parts of the world in complex and interdependent relationship—is rooted in the Holy Spirit, who is the bond of love for the Father and Son. The Spirit is the field or context for divine relationship.

And because the Father, Son, and Spirit share the same essence and interpenetrate one another, the particle, wave, and field perspectives are also united and penetrate one another. There is threeness amidst oneness, unity in diversity. So, my perception of the American Beech trees is reflective of the Trinity. The world, as comprised of particles, waves, and fields, “tells” me that God is trinitarian, one essence in three persons, and that his nature is embedded in what he has made, even in the trees.

All other parts of creation reveal something about the character of God. We just need to be thinking about Scripture and God’s revealed character when we consider a part of creation. The concrete sidewalk speaks of God’s faithfulness, which is reflected in the density of the rock and in the natural laws that keep it in place (each of which is sustained by God’s speech; Heb. 1:3). The resilience of the grass reveals God’s love of growth, which was there even before sin crept in (Gen.

⁴ Of course, the Son (as the Father and the Spirit) is what theologians call *immutable*. He doesn’t change or develop in the way that parts of creation do.

2:8). The ant crawling on the peony petals reveals God's continuous work in the world (Prov. 6:6; John 5:17). All of creation has something to say about who God is.

Communion Behavior and CM

The point is that God is speaking through creation all around us. He has used communion behavior—divine speech—to create and sustain the world. So, it makes perfect sense that creation would have a kind of speech. But we don't often hear it, do we?

If you don't hear it, even when you slow down and listen, it might be because you're suffering from CM, as most of us are. We're not hearing from God or speaking to him on a regular basis. We're all guilty of not mediating on Scripture, and so we all find it difficult to see the world this way. But we have to remember that a failure to read God's word faithfully and speak to him leads to spiritual blindness (Matt. 15:14; 23:16). It also leads to a sort of deafness, an inability to hear the speech of general revelation.

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The problem, you see, isn't that the world fails to speak; it's that we fail to hear. And God has been clear about the treatment we need: pick up the Bible and start reading. Then get on your knees and start praying. This is what it means to have a *relationship* with a communicative Spirit, to lean on communion behavior to grow closer to God. The distance that you feel between yourself and the God who loves you is a result of CM, and it will only go away when you make your relationship a priority by constantly using communion behavior (language) to engage with God.

Doing this is hard work, especially in a distracting world. And that's precisely why we need the direct, verbal communication from God in Scripture. General revelation speaks about God's character. But special revelation not only allows us to hear the voice of general revelation; it allows us to hear God's voice addressing *us*.

God's Speech in Special Revelation

Special revelation has priority over general revelation because it is unique as God's verbal address to us as image bearers. In Scripture, God is not speaking primarily about the world; he is speaking to *you*. While general revelation in a sense "speaks" of God, special revelation *is* the speech of God to people in need of redemption (which is everyone).

While general revelation is given to all and is accessible to all, special revelation is more particular. It is revelation by word, for God's people, offering salvation.⁵ That last part is crucial. General revelation can reveal much about the character of God, but we do not find redemption there.⁶ As Herman Bavinck put it, "Special revelation too is God's self-revelation, but now the self-revelation of the God who is not only just and holy but also gracious and merciful, who not only speaks to us through law but also through the gospel, and who therefore centrally explains to us his name and essence in Christ and becomes known as the Triune God, as Father, Son, and Spirit."⁷

Now, here's the sticking point for many people—a point that leads to the development of CM: they have trouble believing that Scripture is God's speech to *them*. When you crack open the Bible and begin reading, God is speaking not just to the human race in general or even to his chosen people collectively, but to *you*. Many people find this very hard to believe, for several reasons.

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First, they may assume that the Bible is a primarily *human* book, something that God *uses* to speak to people today, but not the word of God itself. If we take this approach to Scripture, then we can't put much credence into believing that God is addressing us. At best, we think he *might or could* address us when we read it.

⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 689.

⁶ We might be able to interpret signs of redemption there, but only because special revelation has uncovered how God has worked to save and sanctify his people.

⁷ Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, 343.

Second, they may assume that the *primary* audience of the Bible is comprised of historical people groups that have long since vanished from the earth. “God may have been speaking to the Israelites through Moses,” they think, “but he’s not speaking to me today. That’s just illogical.”

Third, many people might be sincerely puzzled as to how God can speak to us through recorded historical documents. Our common understanding of personal address involves either someone using the imperative voice (“Listen to me!”) or the personal pronoun “you.” But neither of these things happens with Scripture—at least not upon first glance—so how can we say that God is addressing us through Scripture?

It all goes back to our description of God as a communicative Spirit. As the self-communicating Trinity, God is Lord of communication. Because he is sovereign and all-powerful, he can choose any means he wishes to communicate with his people throughout history. This might make people wonder why God didn’t just choose to speak directly to every person throughout history. God could deliver the same message to every individual, so wouldn’t it be simpler to do that rather than frame his message of salvation as a multi-authored, unfolding narrative spanning thousands of years? Wouldn’t it be so much simpler if God just spoke to us individually each day and told us exactly what he wanted us to believe and do?

It might be simpler, but it certainly wouldn’t require as much faith on our part. There would be less trust involved. Some might ask, “Why require faith and trust?!” Because, as we said earlier, God wants a personal *relationship* with his creatures. And all relationships require faith and trust. There is no such thing as a relationship void of trust. So, while we can’t know for sure why God decided to have special revelation written down as Scripture, we can at least say that such written revelation would create an opportunity for every generation to trust God, to trust the divine author of Scripture. Do you trust him? Do you trust the communicative Spirit to communicate through written words, across generations?

You see, if you do, then it’s not all that hard to believe that God is addressing *you* through the narrative of the Bible. If God can deliver a comprehensible, divine message of redemption through written human language, then can’t he also apply those words to you subjectively? Is that beyond the Lord of language? Certainly not.

Now, some people still want to know in what sense God is addressing us as we read the Bible. Think of it this way. Have you ever read someone else’s mail, or at least seen a letter addressed to another person? If you opened someone else’s mail, you would see an author of some kind addressing that person. “True,” you say. “But that doesn’t mean the author is addressing me.”

Well, what if the person who wrote the letter *knew* that you were going to read it (not just the original recipients)? What if he *knew* that it was going to affect your thoughts and actions and influence the direction of your life? Wouldn't we say that the author technically addressed both the original recipient *and* you? Scripture is not all that different. The sixty-six books that comprise the Bible may have been written for other people, but God knew that you would read them, too. He knew that these written words, breathed out by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16), would someday meet your eyes.

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How do I know this? Because God said so. Jesus Christ suggested this when he prayed for us in John 17, and the Apostle Paul says that things written in the past were written for *our* instruction.

In John 17, Jesus offers what we call the high priestly prayer. In that prayer, he says something quite profound. He says that he's praying not just for his disciples, but for "those who will believe in me through their word" (John 17:20). That's you. That's me. Jesus prayed for us two thousand years ago. He *knew* that you and I would read the words of the Bible one day and that we would have the chance to believe in him. My friends, God saw us coming. He saw us coming long before we were born, long before the New Testament was even written. In fact, he saw us coming before time began (Eph. 1:4). In eternity, God knew exactly who would find his written words and put their faith in his Son by the power of his Spirit. From before the beginning, God knew that he was going to write to *you*.

In Romans 15:4, Paul says, "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Again, think of reading someone else's mail: God delivered a written message in the "former days," and that was written for *your* instruction and hope. Again in 1 Corinthians 10:11, Paul tells us that historical writings were produced for us. As he discusses the famous sins of the Israelites, he says, "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come." If they were written down for Paul and his fellow Christians, they were certainly written down for us as well!

When you read Scripture, remember that God had *you* in mind when it was written. That means you have to read as if God is addressing you, because in a very real sense, he *is*. Let me give you an example. This morning, I read Matthew 6:33 and began meditating on it. I read it as addressed to me, since Christ was speaking to his followers, and I'm one of them. "Pierce Taylor Hibbs, seek my kingdom first and my righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." I heard two things from God: (1) meditate on what it means to live in and uphold his kingdom and righteousness, and (2) understand that I am a man *in Christ*, and he has already done these things on my behalf. The second point encourages me not to fear failure, for I'm already fully accepted by my heavenly Father, and the Spirit of Christ whom my Father sent into my heart (Gal. 4:6) will enable me to do what he is asking me to do (Heb. 13:20–21). Then I begin talking to God. "What does it mean to live in your kingdom? I think it means to live according to your principles and values, respecting your rule by conforming to the heavenly-minded, self-sacrificing image of your Son. And your righteousness is a perfect righteousness—pure motives and intentions, pure thoughts (Matt. 5:21–30). God, lift my mind and heart up to heaven. Help me not to focus on what the world offers, but to seek you and your kingdom first . . . *first*."

Communion Behavior and CM Revisited

Communion behavior is central to combatting CM. Half of the battle is hearing *from* God, and we can do this by reading Scripture and knowing that God is addressing *us*, and by using what we know from Scripture to listen to the voice of general revelation.

The real power of CM lies in its two-pronged attack, for both parts of CM work in tandem. If we stop hearing from God, we'll be far less likely to speak to him. This shouldn't be too surprising, since very few of us continue to speak to someone who has stopped speaking to us. Now, God *never* stops speaking to us, so we don't have to worry about that. But we do have to worry about our spiritual ears getting clogged to point of functional deafness. Hearing from God is critical if we are to speak to God. That is where we turn next.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you describe a moment in which you "heard" the voice of general revelation and what it was saying about God?
2. Why do you think it is difficult for people to hear the voice of general revelation?

3. When you read Scripture, do you read it as if God is addressing *you*? Why or why not?
4. What are some things you can do to develop a habit of reading God's word and hearing the voice of general revelation?

Communion Behavior Applied: Prayer

The speaking God said “Speak” to us.
He spoke so we would hear.
The one who gave a voice to dust
Bends low his holy ear.

* * *

The first part of addressing CM is hearing *from* God, but this would be an inadequate treatment on its own. We must also speak *to* God. There must be dialogue if there is to be relationship. Growing closer to the God who speaks involves, oddly enough, *speaking*. We use communion behavior (speech) to commune with the God who dwells in self-communion.

In general, we could say that all speech directed toward God falls into the category of *prayer*. As John Frame put it (following Wayne Grudem), prayer is “personal communication with God.”¹ It’s no accident that I call language *communion behavior*. The words “communication” and “communion” come from the Latin *communis*, which means “common.” Prayer is about finding a common place with God—a sacred and mysterious meeting place through language, through self-expression. We can’t say exactly what this meeting place is. Paul Miller says, “Something mysterious happens in the hidden contours of life when we pray. If we try to figure out the mystery, it will elude us. The mystery is real.”² That real mystery is where communion happens. It’s where we grow closer to the God who speaks. We can’t explain what it’s like to feel close to this God, but we know it when we experience it, and it follows from prayer: from the engaged belief that God is someone who hears us speaking and responds. It is in those moments that we are utterly confident using the word “relationship” with reference to God.

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¹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 924.

² Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2017), 110.

There are many good books on prayer, but I want to focus here on something that I've not seen presented frequently in any of them. Prayer is often talked about as involving various elements: petitions, requests, pleadings, celebrations, confessions—the list goes on. But what about communing with God in the ordinary? What about speaking to God concerning the cracks in the sidewalk, or the song on the radio, or the signs you pass on the highway, or the weather? We tend to trivialize these things, assuming God wants us to speak to him about “big” things. But that doesn't seem to be biblical. God wants us to speak to him about *everything*. He is a God who communes with himself in three persons; he *loves* communion. Why would he put limitations on conversation topics in our prayer life?

In English language teaching, they have something called *phatic communion*. This is a fancy phrase that refers to chitchat establishing an informal and light social atmosphere. It's primary purpose is not to convey information but to create an arena for more dialogue. It's the sort of language you use with strangers at the grocery store. “Nice outside, isn't it?” “Have you been to that new restaurant yet?” “Did you catch the game last night?” Most people play off this language as irrelevant babble, a careless use of words. Of course, it could be just that. But it can genuinely fulfill a communicative purpose. It can set the stage for deeper dialogue.

Do you use phatic communion with God? Do you talk to God just to fill the air with the possibility of communication? Or do you wait in silence until you feel as if you *have* to pray (i.e., when there's a grave trauma or urgent need)? I think most of us fit into the second category. We feel somehow strange or irreverent “shooting the breeze” with God. Doing that would suggest . . . well, it would suggest that God is really present with us. You only use phatic communion with other strangers when other strangers are actually around you. Our refusal to do it with God suggests more about our lack of faith in God's presence than it does our reverence for him. If you really believed that God was listening to everything, wouldn't you talk to him all the time? Wouldn't you long for any sliver of communion you could find throughout the day?

Perhaps you disagree with me, but my point is simple: our lives should be bent on communing with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If they aren't, that may be the reason we've developed CM in the first place. And if we refuse to seek God in prayer every day, our feeling distanced from him will only get worse.

Communion Behavior and CM Once More

Prayer, as communion behavior, is our positive contribution to our relationship with God. It's not meritorious in any sense, since God himself is responsible for prodding us into conversation with him. On our own, we would be mute. But there is a sense in which prayer is something that we must bring to the divine-human relationship. We must engage. We must speak.

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This is usually intuitive in human relationships, but because God is a Spirit, we neglect it; we stay silent. But we can't continue to do this and have any hope of recovering from CM. We were made to speak—not first to other humans and second to God, but first to God and second to other human beings. God is my primary conversation partner, and he's yours too. That may seem foolish to the rest of the world, maybe even crazy, but God “chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” (1 Cor. 1:27). In the world, ignoring an invisible communicative Spirit is ordinary. If you and I are blending in with the crowd, that's a problem. We should be sticking out. We should seem strange. People should wonder why we're talking to an invisible God. They should wonder why we're speaking when they can't see anyone else around us. They should ask questions, and we should be ready with answers (1 Pet. 3:15).

We are, after all, speaking creatures made in the image of a speaking God, the all-powerful, ever-present communicative Spirit. It's time we started acting like it. It's time we spoke up.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some things that get in the way of your prayer life?
2. Do you sometimes feel as if God is not listening to your prayers? If so, why do you think you feel this way?
3. What occasions in life prompt you to pray? Why do you pray at those times and not at other times?

4. What do you think keeps people from praying in today's culture? How could we address these things?

Conclusion: In Divine Company

You cannot see the Trinity,
Nor hear or smell or taste.
But he is our great company,
And soon we'll see his face.

* * *

I haven't mentioned the title of the book yet. I wanted to wait until the end. In many ways, growing closer to the God who speaks is a matter of believing in the omnipresence of God. You and I are in divine company—*all the time*. The God who speaks is always around us. Let me close by drawing our attention to a few passages.

Psalm 139:7–12 famously describes God's omnipresence.

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.

The obvious answer to the rhetorical question in verse 7 is "nowhere." God is everywhere. Make that truth particular in your life. God is in Quakertown, Pennsylvania. God is all around 3rd Street. God is in my office. God is right in front of me when I type at my computer screen. God is _____ (fill in the blank).

Now, God isn't here in a physical sense, because God is a Spirit. He's immaterial by nature. But he is still present with us as a Spirit. He is with us in a sense that goes deeper than physicality.

The same truth is expressed in Acts 17:28. "In him we live and move and have our being." *In* God—that's where we do all of life. It is difficult to say what this means precisely, but it certainly

suggests that God is present all around us. We do not have to go looking for God. He has already found us, because he has always been with us. We just didn't perceive him. We didn't *listen* to him. We didn't *speak* to him. So, we've imagined that God is distant from us. The truth of it is that we're responsible for the distance we feel. We feel distance as a result of our CM, our communicative malnourishment. The only thing that will strengthen our spiritual muscles and help us feel closer to God is using language, communion behavior, to hear from and speak with him.

My point in this little book, then, is that you're already in divine company. Right now, the Trinity is speaking to you (in Scripture and through general revelation) and offering to hold discourse if you open your lips and loosen your tongue. All of us is in divine company. We just haven't acknowledged it yet.

Right now, the Trinity is speaking to you (in Scripture and through general revelation) and offering to hold discourse if you open your lips and loosen your tongue.

If you or a loved one is suffering from CM, talk with your pastor today to see if communion behavior is right for you. I guarantee that it is, because it has to be. The only way to grow closer to a speaking God is to listen and speak back. It's that simple, though certainly not easy to practice. My prayer for you is that you put this little book down, pick up the Bible and then open your mouth. Growing closer to God could be a conversation away.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you believe that you are in divine company? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think people have a hard time believing that God is all around them?
3. Do you think speaking with God (prayer) helps to remind us that God is omnipresent? What other things might help?

To learn more about communion behavior and about growing closer to the God who speaks, and to access other resources and books by the author, visit wordsfortheologians.org.