

Language and the Trinity

A Meeting Place for the Global Church

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

I am honored and humbled to contribute a testament to the teaching and life of Vern Poythress, whose friendship and passion for a God-centered view of all things have formatively shaped me as a young scholar and Christian. His most influential work for me, as he well knows, is his work on language, particularly his attention to its divine Trinitarian roots. And in light of his heartfelt concern to serve the global church and to witness the knowledge and glory of God covering the earth “as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14), it seems fitting to apply my passion for his work to his passion for the work of the global church. That, in brief, is what I aim to do here.



In many ways, the global church is no longer a dream; it is a reality. This is not simply because the gospel has spread like wildfire to places

that had never been ignited by the name of Christ, but because every wildfire sends a smoke trail into the sky. Surveying the contours of global Christianity, we can see smoke trails rising from many regions—Nigeria, Taiwan, China, Indonesia, France, Germany, India. Province and precinct, city and suburb, smoke signals are everywhere. This is not to belittle the importance of continual evangelism. Many pockets of the world have yet to hear the name and bow the knee (Phil. 2:10). I am only saying that we are aware of ourselves on the global level, perhaps in a way unprecedented in the first two thousand years of Christian history.

No doubt, the technological developments of the last thirty years or so have played a part in this. Marshall McLuhan prophesied decades ago that humanity was returning to its tribal roots. Whereas we were once concerned to expand and create distance between one another, we now desire to contract and close such spatial and temporal gaps with the various media at our disposal. McLuhan thought we were becoming a *global village*, “a metaphor for our planet reduced in all aspects of its functioning and social organization to the size of a village.” For him, this was due to the effects of electricity and the redounding impact of the telegraph.¹ If when he wrote during the mid-1960s that our fragmented civilization was “experiencing an instantaneous reassembling of all its mechanized bits into an organic whole,” how much more is this the case today?²

1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, critical ed., ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko, 2003), 562.

2. McLuhan suggested that our world was fragmented—people had more distance between themselves psychologically—in part because of the effects of the print medium (*ibid.*, 117–24). Walter Ong seems to concur, arguing that print replaced a communal, sound-dominated culture with an individualist, sight-dominated one. The printed word, unlike the spoken word, was not bound by space and time. Printed words could be sent far and wide, addressing not just groups, but individuals. Ong writes:

By removing words from the world of sound where they had first had their origin in active human interchange and relegating them definitively to visual surface, . . . print encouraged human beings to think of their own interior conscious and unconscious resources as more and more thing-like, impersonal and religiously neutral. Print encouraged the mind to sense that its possessions were held in some sort of inert mental space. (Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* [New York: Routledge, 2002], 114–29)

Both Ong and McLuhan, however, seem to underestimate the “organic unity” that is fostered by print, both in space and in time, in our current global context and throughout history. God uses the printed word, we must remember, to preserve his truth for generations. So we would be reductionistic if we claimed that print led to individualism and isolation. It also led and continues to lead to unity, for receiving the written words of another “is the basis of literary knowledge

Of course, soothsayers, especially the secular sort, are usually half-right, and they always miss central biblical truths when poetically pontificating about the future. Unity is not a matter of media; it is a matter of persons: a matter of the heart and spirit being restored and united to the person of Christ by the power of the Spirit to the glory of God the Father. It matters little if we are moving toward a global village that has become blind, deaf, and dumb to the truth of the Trinity. There can be no global village, no organic unity for humanity, apart from the spiritual unity of the church.³

Yet, while we know biblically that our union is primarily spiritual, I do not want to say that there are no external markers of that union. Campfires of spiritual truth can be built, and those who are marked for the same destination can gather around them for warmth and strength amid the darkness and dispassion of a godless global village. In this sense, all I would like to do here is build a campfire, using the concepts of language and the Trinity as fodder.

Narrowing the Scope on “Language and the Trinity”

As topics of discussion, however, language and the Trinity are oceans in themselves, and we can easily be swept away in the current of either one if we do not tie down our anchor. What exactly do I mean when I say “language and the Trinity”?

that can perhaps become the basis for personal knowledge, for communion over space and time” (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998], 202). This hinges, of course, on our decision to *communicate what we read to others*, rather than storing information in the warehouse of the mind. In the latter respect, McLuhan and Ong are more correct than I would like to admit.

3. Ralph Smith points this out using the language of “harmony”:

The perfect harmony of the One and the Many in God means that men experience the harmony of the One and the Many in society when they are in conformity to God’s will [i.e., living faithfully as new creatures in Christ]. Though perfect harmony never comes to fruition in this world of sin, it will characterize the social life of the resurrected society of the New Jerusalem.

He also helpfully adds that

our self—who we are—is determined by our relationships, just as the three Persons of the Trinity are who they are in their relationships. There is no Father unless He is the Father of the Son. The Spirit is who He is because He is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. In God, relationships among the members of the Trinity are essential to the definition, or the name, of each of the three Persons. Since we are created in God’s image, we, too, are defined, or named, in terms of our relationships [first to God and then to others]. (Ralph A. Smith, *Trinity and Reality: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* [Moscow, ID: Canon, 2004], 161, 163)

The short of it is that I would like us to think of these two topics *concurrently* and *conjointly*, but we still need to provide a scope for the topics themselves. By “Trinity,” I want to fix us more broadly on the biblical, orthodox, and creedal definition of God as one being in three persons.⁴ In this sense, our anchor is not tied to the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, or to how exactly we understand “person” in relation to the Godhead, or to how we can distinguish God’s threeness from his oneness. These are vitally important topics, and I assume a position with regard to each of them. But I do not want to focus here on details of Trinitarian dogma. I simply want us to keep in mind the central Christian truth that God is one being in three persons, and that those persons “speak” or commune with one another in an eternal exchange of love and glory.

In terms of language, I want to focus on *what language does* for persons. Language is what I call *communion behavior*. Every instance of language can in some way be seen as drawing persons closer together—physically, socially, cognitively, or spiritually. This communion behavior is perhaps the crown jewel of the *imago Dei* and reflects the Trinity in its glorious complexity and depth.⁵

Language and the Trinity, considered in conjunction with one another, is our scope—the tri-personal God who speaks and his creatures made in his linguistic image. Admittedly, that scope is still, by any standard, far broader than most would like. But the expansive breadth is intentional, as it serves the purposes we have for union in the global church—a church doctrinally and historically variegated, not to men-

4. For background on this terminology, I am drawing on Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 348–68; Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 89–268; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 296–304; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 82–99; and John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 421–43.

5. For example, Edward Morgan explains how Augustine understands this reflection, i.e., human speech, to be analogous to the incarnation—God’s internal Word manifested in the flesh and applied in the love of the Spirit—and thus how “the incarnation in fact reads as a commencement of an explicitly Trinitarian conversation between God and humanity, whereby through the incarnation humanity recognizes as Trinity the God who addresses it. Reflection on this conversation leads the human person closer to God, who is truth. Finally, the Spirit inspires this conversation” (Edward Morgan, “The Concept of Person in Augustine’s De Trinitate,” in *Augustine and Other Latin Writers: Papers Presented at the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held at Oxford*, ed. F. Young, M. Edwards, and P. Parvis, *Studia Patristica* 43 [Paris: Peeters, 2006], 206).

tion culturally diffuse. For such a church, union must begin at thirty thousand feet, not on the ground of nuanced dogmatics.⁶

With this in mind—the self-communing God who is three-in-one and language as a Trinitarian, image-bearing behavior—we have all the fodder we need to set the world aflame, let alone build a campfire. But before we strike the match, we need to remind ourselves of what caused our separation and global dispersion to begin with. What brought about our divided tongues? To answer this, we will start by revisiting the story of Babel in Genesis 11. Then, leaving off that story and portending the solution in the Trinity, we will move on to consider the Trinity and language, before once more returning to Babel and the resolution of our global dispersion.

Babel: When the Word-Made World Was Broken

Before we get to the story of Babel, a story about words, we should remind ourselves that we live in a Word-made world. Reality is profoundly linguistic in the sense that it was spoken into being by the Trinitarian God.⁷ The Father uttered the Word in the power of the Spirit, and life took shape: dawn emerged from darkness; seas were gathered; plants and produce pushed through the soil; stars were set burning in the sky; waters teemed with life; birds whistled in the wind; and a motley multitude of land-dwelling creatures began to march and creep and climb.

And people, the image-bearing pinnacle of creation, were breathed into by the very Spirit of God (Gen. 2:7; cf. Job 27:3; 33:4) and thus endowed with the capacity to communicate and commune with one another. We were given words to function in a Word-made world. And even after the fall, when God's word was first exchanged for the

6. I would, at the same time, be the first to say that such nuances are critical not only to our intellectual but also to our spiritual formation.

7. On the nature of reality as Word-based, see Vern Sheridan Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 23–27. Frame notes that “nature is God’s self-expression. Nature behaves as it does because God’s word tells it what to do” (John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010], 76). Or, as Jonathan Edwards put it, “As the system of nature, and the system of revelation, are both divine works, so both are in difference senses a divine word. Both are the voice of God to intelligent creatures, a manifestation and declaration of himself to mankind” (Jonathan Edwards, “The ‘Miscellanies’: Number 1340,” in *Christian Apologetics Past and Present*, vol. 2, *From 1500*, ed. William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011], 237).

insidious words of another creature, we communed with one another using the same language (Gen. 11:1).⁸ But that was soon to change.

Language had been given to us as an image-bearing reflection of the self-communing God.⁹ As with everything else in creation, our language was meant to serve our relationship with him and with other people.¹⁰ *Relational unity*—that was always the purpose for language, a purpose rooted in God himself.¹¹ And yet we left this behind in a selfish venture to make a name for ourselves.

And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth. (Gen. 11:3–9)

Note two critical details in this passage. First, the goal and purpose of building the tower was to make a name for themselves, perhaps a name made equal to or even higher than God’s own name, and thus to preclude dispersion. The “name for ourselves” seems to point to both

8. On this linguistic tragedy, see Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2014), 35–36; and G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 396.

9. On speech as an essential attribute of God, see Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 522–24.

10. “The design plan of language is to serve as the medium of covenantal relations with God, with others, with the world” (Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 206).

11. God communes with himself in the language of love and glory. See John 17:5; Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henry De Vries (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 1995), 542; Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Holy Trinity: In the Beginning There Was Love*, trans. Roland Clark (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012), 14; and Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 480–81.

their pride and an addled understanding of unity: pride in the sense that their individual names did not bring them the weight of glory they desired, unity in the sense that all people would be able to gather to one place.¹² The painful irony of sin, of course, is the twofold curse: they were left “nameless” and were scattered over the face of the earth.

Second, note the divinely endowed power of language. Because of their linguistic union, a union we noted is rooted in God himself, the Trinitarian Creator says, “Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (11:6). *Nothing*. I do not know of another place in Scripture that so openly acknowledges the power of language.

We will return to each of these details later on. For now, we can simply note that sin scatters us. That is why we even have need of the phrase “global church.” We were dispersed across the globe because of our sinful lust for glory and godless unity; this dispersion was an act of God’s righteous and gracious judgment, for if God had not confused our languages, we would have succeeded in our goal (11:6) and wrested ourselves, to our own horror, from the God who speaks. Out of love and mercy, God confused our languages so that we might one day have union again, with him and with each other. But this new union was to be found not in the uplifting of “a name for ourselves,” but in the communal uplifting of the greatest name (Phil. 2:9–10).

Fast forward to the New Testament, after redemption wound its way through history, in promises and punishments, grace and gratitude, orisons and answers. On one terrible and triumphant day, we were granted entrance into the name above all other names and the unity we had always longed for (Phil. 2:9; John 17:22–23). At the blood-soaked soil near the foot of the cross, people of every tribe and tongue enter into Christ, by the power of the Spirit. And each one who does so joins the glorious parade of faith, marching through time with variant voices and diverse dialects, not toward a tower (Gen. 11:4) but toward the Trinity. That is where we are headed, so let us pause here

12. Note that their aim was to achieve, in this sense, a godless unity that challenged God’s own plans for union. The Hebrew used here, וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-לָנֶם שֵׁם, is telling, since the verb is the same as that used in reference to God’s creation (Gen. 1:7, 16, 25, and, most importantly, 26), which suggests that they are “making a name” not in mimetic submission to God’s creational activity but in oppositional defiance of it. The “let us make” in Gen. 11:4 seems to be a sinfully motivated parallel to God’s “let us make” in Gen. 1:26; the making in 1:26 was carried out in loving communion; the making in 11:4, in prideful disunion.

to explore the Trinity and language before returning to the resolution of Babel and the union of the global church.

The Trinity

In the history of the church, the Trinity has long been recognized as the doctrine that sets Christianity apart. Consider just a few affirmations from the Reformed tradition.¹³

[God] so proclaims himself the sole God as to offer himself to be contemplated clearly in three persons. Unless we grasp these, only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God.¹⁴

Certain things revealed in the word are of such a nature that without peril of salvation they can be unknown (although they cannot be denied without that peril). However, not only the denial, but also the simple ignorance of the Trinity is damnable.¹⁵

The entire Christian belief system, all of special revelation, stands or falls with the confession of God's Trinity. It is the core of the Christian faith, the root of all its dogmas, the basic content of the new covenant.¹⁶

It is a great mistake to regard [the doctrine of the Trinity] as a mere speculative or abstract truth, concerning the constitution of the Godhead, with which we have no practical concern, or which we are required to believe simply because it is revealed. On the contrary, it underlies the whole plan of salvation, and determines the character of the religion . . . of all true Christians.¹⁷

In setting forth its doctrine of the Trinity the church prepared itself for its life and death struggle with the world.¹⁸

The doctrine of the Trinity is not an appendage to the gospel or an accolade of the early church that must be given lip service in the

13. This is but a sampling of what can be found across particular Christian traditions in the writings of the early church, the Scholastic period, the Reformation, and post-Reformation orthodoxy.

14. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.2.

15. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 261.

16. Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 333.

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

18. Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 362; see also 30, 59.

twenty-first century by those who really only care about “Christ crucified.” Christ was crucified, after all, at the behest of the Father, further testifying to the latter’s sovereign rule, and was raised by the Spirit, proclaiming the life-giving agency of the Holy Ghost (Mark 14:36; John 4:34; Rom. 8:11).¹⁹ If set in isolation from the Father and the Spirit, the interjection “Christ crucified!” is, in some ways, a misguided avowal, for it ultimately misconstrues the object of our faith.²⁰ The Trinity in its entirety—whether in conjunction with creation, fall, redemption, or consummation—is central to Christian belief, especially to the crucifixion. This does not mean that we should not lift up the one name of Christ for all that he has done and is doing; Scripture compels us to do so. It simply means we can never afford to ignore the Trinitarian context in which that work was carried out, for if we do, we fail to understand the very nature of that work. The Trinity, then, even in the glorious work of Christ’s atonement, is central to the system of Christian belief.

And perhaps one of the most striking attributes of the Trinity is its internal (*ad intra*) and external (*ad extra*) communication, a fact brought to my attention by a passage in what has become one of my favorite works on language:

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.²¹

19. Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 92–93. Hill also notes that Jesus’s reception of the “name above all names,” κύριος, which is commonly used of God in the Septuagint, “exerts a ‘unitive pressure’ whereby the unique name of God in the LXX . . . becomes an assertion of oneness between the ‘persons’ of Father and Son in Phil. 2:6–11.” Referring to the raising of Jesus by the Spirit, he further solidifies the united action of the Trinity by relating this to the identity of the persons: “God and Jesus are who they are only in relation to this action of the Spirit, just as the Spirit is who the Spirit is only as the Spirit of God and of Jesus” (*ibid.*, 93–96, 163).

20. “The good news is triune: the Father shares his light, life, and love in the Son through the Spirit” (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014], 75).

21. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 18. He goes on to cite John 16:13–15, as well as chapter 17, in which the Son prays directly to the Father. See also Vern S. Poythress, *God-*

Along these same lines, Douglas Kelly notes, “there is—and has been from all eternity—talk, sharing and communication in the innermost life of God.”²²

There seem to be two models for our understanding of this communication. First, there is what I call the *consciousness model*: “God the Father is the speaker, God the Son is the speech, and God the Spirit is the breath carrying that speech to its destination. The Spirit is also the power who brings about its effects.”²³ I use “consciousness” as a descriptor because this analogy is based upon a single person’s conscious communication.

Second, there is the *interpersonal model*: “God is the Father addressing the Son, the Son responding to the Father, and the Spirit overhearing.”²⁴ This is more along the lines of what Poythress identifies as “New Testament” revelation, in which we see the distinct persons of the Godhead communicating with one another. In this model, the

Centered Biblical Interpretation (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999), 16–20; and Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 523.

22. Douglas Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in Light of the Church*, vol. 1, *The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2008), 487. Vanhoozer adds that “it is on the basis of God’s communicative presence and activity in history that we come to understand divine communicative perfection in eternity” (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 245).

23. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 21.

24. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 246. I am not comfortable with the language Vanhoozer takes up with regard to God having his “being” in communicative action. Though I can certainly appreciate his emphasis on God’s internal communication, that wording seems dangerously close to Barth’s language of God having his being “in action,” a teaching that will ultimately lead to the corrosion of the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity. See James J. Cassidy, “Election and Trinity,” *WTJ* 71, no. 1 (2009): 53–81. In this regard, I find Oliphint’s work on the being of God more helpful: “God, while entering into a special covenant relationship with his people, is and remains, nevertheless, *a se*. He and he alone is independent. He *is*, in a way that no one or nothing else *is*. God alone is the ‘I AM’” (K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006], 174–75). Elsewhere Oliphint says:

There are distinctions to be made between God’s essential character—those properties that apply to God as God—and attributes that have in view the relationship that God as triune sustains to himself (and, secondarily, to the world). There are *personal* properties, therefore, that apply only to the respective persons of the Trinity (for example, filiation applies only to the Son, not the Spirit or the Father), and not to the oneness of God. So also, there are essential properties that serve to highlight or emphasize God’s essential relational character—properties such as the love of God (directed, in the first place, to the three persons).” (Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 40)

See also Oliphint, “Simplicity, Triunity, and the Incomprehensibility of God,” in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 215–35. It is important to keep in view both God’s triunity and his simplicity whenever we discuss his being.

Father, the Son, and Spirit are each capable of carrying out the linguistic functions of speaking and hearing.²⁵

We must pause here to derogate the stale assumption that the Christian West has more affinity with the consciousness model and the East with the interpersonal model. Let us set aside exclusive reductionisms and pick up the Good Book.²⁶ Scripture accounts for both models; each is thus necessary to a sound understanding of the Trinity.²⁷ While the consciousness model draws directly on the linguistic analogy of the Son as the Word of the Father,²⁸ the interpersonal model synthesizes what the New Testament, in particular, says about how the persons of the Godhead interact with one another, both in time and in eternity.

Language

The above linguistic models of the Trinity are each reflected in us as God's image bearers. In analogical relation to God, we are speakers (Father), who produce speech (Son), with our God-given breath (Spirit).²⁹ We are also distinct *persons* who communicate with other persons.

25. In this respect, Vanhoozer is also right in affirming that "the gospels assign speaking parts to each of the three divine persons." The Father speaks (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11); the Son obviously speaks throughout the Gospels; and the Spirit speaks through believers (Matt. 10:20). The Son also hears (John 12:49–50), as does the Spirit (John 16:13). This supplements, rather than eclipses, the order of persons in the Godhead.

26. We all have what Poythress calls "emphasizing reductionisms" because we cannot avoid choosing a focus. "Exclusive reductionisms" are the problematic sort, because they insist on "the exclusive correctness of one's own form of emphasizing reductionism" (Vern S. Poythress, *Philosophy, Science, and the Sovereignty of God* [Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976], 48–49). This seems apropos in Trinitarian debates when there is clear scriptural support for both a consciousness and interpersonal model of divine communication.

27. While I appreciate Keith Johnson's article in which he claims that "Scripture does not call us to imitate the way in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to *one another* in their inner life," I would contend that we have no choice but to imitate the inner Trinity according to the consciousness and interpersonal models described above. I do think that the *imitatio trinitatis* is fuller than, though certainly encompassing, the *imitatio Christi* (Keith E. Johnson, "Imitatio Trinitatis: How Should We Imitate the Trinity?," *WTJ* 75, no. 2 [2013]: 334). I also think Frame shows keen insight in noting that the mutual glorification of persons in the Godhead is also expected, derivatively, of us (Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 481).

28. On the Son as the Word of the Father, 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 (Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Theology Proper*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. [Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2014], 57).

29. This is bound up with the triad of *meaning, control, and presence*:

The Father is closely associated with being the source of meaning. Meaning originates from the plan of the Father. As executor of the Father's will, the Son is closely associated with control. The Father speaks specific orders in his word, which is the Word of the Son. By means of the Son, the Father carries out his will. And the Holy Spirit is closely associated with the presence of God. . . .

Of course, we are not the same kind of persons as the persons of the Godhead, a topic that has, of late, drawn much discussion in Reformed circles.³⁰ We are, however, creaturely analogues of the tri-personal God, and all of our coherent and “good” behaviors are rooted in the Trinity.³¹

In sum, language is central to the Trinity *ad intra* and *ad extra*. God is speaker, speech, and breath, as well as distinct persons in linguistic communion with one another. Both of these elements are reflected in human language analogically.³² Each of us is a speaker who uses speech and breath to communicate with other distinct persons. Thus, the mysterious prism of the linguistic Trinity refracts divine light onto the behavior of his embodied creatures.

But that light seems often faint in us, for sin ever works to snuff it out. As speakers, our words and the breath we use to produce them are discordant. Our hearts and minds many times mean one thing while our words another. The breath we use to speak breeds greed rather than grace, and our interpersonal relationships are laced with misunderstanding, malevolence, and misery. So, let us return to Babel now to remind ourselves why this is the case, and where our hope lies.

Reversing Babel: When the Word Made the World Anew

The chaotic disunion that was wrought at the base of Babel, an act of God’s judgment and grace, was both internal and external: within each

Man’s speech shows meaning, control, and presence. In this respect it images the meaning, control, and presence of God’s speech. (Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 25, 30)

30. Berkhof summarizes the differences between the divine persons and human persons by saying that “man is uni-personal, while God is tri-personal” (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 84). With regard to “persons” in God, Bavinck suggests that “the three persons are the one divine personality brought to complete self-unfolding, a self-unfoldment arising out of, by the agency of, and within the divine being” (Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 303; on the benefits and deficiencies of the “person” analogy, see 301–4). See also Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 475–89. For a discussion of the contemporary debate on “persons” and “relations,” see Wesley Hill, “Divine Persons and Their ‘Reduction’ to Relations: A Plea for Conceptual Clarity,” *IJST* 14, no. 2 (2012): 148–60.

31. “As our being itself is derived from God (we exist because he exists), and as our knowledge is an analogue of his knowledge (we know because he knows), so, too, our capacity for language and other forms of communication is derivative of his. We speak because God speaks, because he is a speaking God; that is his nature and so, derivatively, it is ours” (Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Speech and the Image of God: Biblical Reflections on Language and Its Uses,” in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries*, ed. David VanDrunen [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004], 182). “Finite persons are also a means of God’s revelation. We are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27), meaning that everything we were created to be reflects God in some way. Our bodies, minds, personalities reflect God, both individually and corporately” (Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 680).

32. Vern S. Poythress, “Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til’s Idea of Analogy,” *WTJ* 57, no. 1 (1995): 193–95.

person's consciousness and among interpersonal relations. In the former sense, Bavinck notes that "the confusion of languages is the result of confusion in ideas, in the mind, and in life."³³ Because language is deeply intertwined with thought, the confusion of languages was not merely an outward and phonetic curse, as if all of the people had the same idea but different sounds by which to articulate it; rather, the confusion of languages brought about contentious impressions, false premonitions, and disparate passions.

Externally, of course, this led to our scattering over the face of the earth. There can be no union where spiritual and psychic dissonance reign, and so in this sense, the physical distance between people was little more than an outworking of the distance that was already established between them internally. A warring disparity of souls brought about a lamentable dispersion of bodies. We fled to the corners of the world.

But in the person of the Word, the Logos through whom the world was created, the Trinity did not leave us to our scattered selves. As Vos wrote, "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."³⁴ By the Word, God brought us into being; in the Word, he beckoned us back to communion. The incarnate Word lifted up his voice on our behalf, so that we might "all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us" (John 17:21). "Us"—what a primal and precious pronoun! And it is the "us" not only of Father and Son but of the Spirit also.

It is the Spirit's work, mind you, that inaugurated our gathering from linguistic dispersion. On the day of Pentecost, in the brilliant light of midmorning—the very light that the Father spoke by the Son and in the Spirit (Gen. 1:3)—the curse of Babel was broken. And how fitting it was that they were communing with one another as the Trinity, the God of communion, was about to unite them (Acts 2:1)! Disparate thoughts from disparate tongues were there about to receive a language lesson from the God who speaks.

33. Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 525.

34. 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. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 63.

And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:2–4)

Divided tongues—one flame; distinct persons—the same Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4–11). And the Devil himself could not intrude upon that divine discourse. The Spirit who had worked in conjunction with the Word to create the world and give life (Gen. 2:7), and who had done the same to restore it (1 Cor. 15:45), was now translating discord into harmony—gathering minds and hearts and voices around the intractable truth that God works in history (Acts 2:11).³⁵ He works—he speaks, by his Son and in the Spirit, in grace that cannot be muted.

This is how the speaking God resolved our problem of Babel in redemptive history. We had wanted to make a name for ourselves; we had wanted to unite in vain bravado; we had an otiose dream of independence. But now, every tongue lifts up the one name of Christ and thus gathers to the tower of our hope (Prov. 18:10). Our shoal dream of independence was replaced by a far deeper vision of communion.

Pentecost ushered in a gathering—a gathering of people once dispersed over the face of the earth but now united, lifting up the one name, the Word of the Father, who created all things (Col. 1:16) and who is recreating all things (Rev. 21:5).

We have inherited this legacy, perhaps the apex of linguistic redemption. Each of us is now part of the great gathering. And it is, as we noted, a gathering to the Trinity: the God who is three-in-one, who is a language community unto himself.

Meaning, Efficacy, and Presence

But, you may ask, how might we mark those heading to the same hearth as we are? After all, many can superficially profess faith in the Trinity and a respect for language. As we stated at the outset, these two areas are oceans in and of themselves. What does it actually look like

35. I owe the emphasis of this truth to one of Lane Tipton's lectures on union with Christ, delivered on Westminster's campus in the summer of 2015.

to treasure the Trinity and language conjointly? Perhaps we can say little more than that those who are walking toward this campfire will be marked by their *use* of words.

This involves at least three elements. First is the *communion-inspired meaning* of our words—not just that our words have meaning, since that is unavoidable, but that our semantic goal is oriented toward communion with others—socially, mentally, or spiritually.³⁶ Such communion is drawn from an awareness that all meaning “originates from the plan of the Father,”³⁷ and thus any semantic purpose aligned with that plan *can be realized*. In this sense, our words should concurrently evince a desire for communion with others and a faith in the Father’s providential plan to bring about that communion *through his Word*.³⁸

This leads to the second element, the cherished *efficacy* of our words, either productively (writing, speech) or receptively (reading, hearing).³⁹ Efficacy can take various forms—word choice, respect for elegance and form, or simply one’s ability to handle words with care and precision, suggesting profound appreciation for the incarnation of a particular idea.⁴⁰ Whatever form efficacy might take, there is always a sense in which the speaker or writer holds “the fundamental presupposition that it is possible to speak truly,”⁴¹ winsomely, and effectively. If before Babel we were capable of doing all things with our words (Gen. 11:6), how much more so is God capable and willing to do all things *through* us in his Word (Phil. 4:13)! We must cast down our communicative lethargy and practice the divine efficacy of language, as those who are both quick to listen (James 1:19) and able to speak or write a word to one who is weary (Isa. 50:4).

Third, we can identify those who are walking toward the Trinity by

36. This is related to Poythress’s triad of meaning, control, and presence, which is built on Frame’s lordship triad of authority, control, and presence. See Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 25–31, and John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 15–18. Communion-inspired meaning is also related to Dorothy Sayers’s notion of the creative *idea*, which serves to unite a piece of discourse. See Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (New York: HarperOne, 1987), 37.

37. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 25.

38. Or, as Vanhoozer notes, discourse “is a means of personal communication and communion” (Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 219).

39. This is related to the “control” aspect of language, which, in terms of the Trinity, leads us to worship the Son “as executor of the Father’s will” (Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 25).

40. See Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, 86–92, on the incarnate “energy” of an author’s idea.

41. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 53.

their understanding that language evokes personal *presence*, that the linguistic expression of our desires, thoughts, and personality carries *us*.⁴² This is particularly critical with our written words, which Derrida decried as dead.⁴³ Because “God’s word and his personal presence are inseparable,” analogically, our words and our personal presence are as well.⁴⁴ We are *with* our words.⁴⁵

Most importantly, these three elements are coinherent. Referring to his triad of meaning, control, and presence, Poythress writes: “Without meaning, speech is empty. Without control, it does not accomplish anything, and makes no difference. Without presence, speech is disconnected from the speaker, and again loses its point.”⁴⁶ This ectypal coinherence of our language is analogically tied to the archetypal coinherence of the Godhead, in which “the Father as speaker, the Son as the Word spoken, and the Spirit as the ‘breath’ function together in producing God’s speech. All three persons participate fully in the entire utterance, and the speech is, as it were, ‘indwelt’ by all three persons.”⁴⁷ Thus, communion-inspired meaning, efficacy, and presence should all be evident in a person’s use of words. Much more can and should be said here, but in the interest of brevity, these three elements will at least help us to begin working out our identity in the global church as Trinitarian image bearers of the God who speaks.

Conclusion

The global church must be looking for grounds to unite; we must be looking for places to build campfires around which we can huddle and draw strength and warmth amid a dark and cold world filled with people whose minds are still hostile toward God (Rom. 8:7) and who are often critical of language as a means of communicating truth.⁴⁸

42. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 30.

43. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 62.

44. Frame, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, 68.

45. Assuming this is part of what can make our words powerful, which is related to Sayers’s triad, and to the work of the Spirit (Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, 37–38).

46. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 31.

47. *Ibid.*, 32.

48. We might call this “linguistic atheism” (Vanhoozer uses the more narrow descriptor, “literary atheism”)—a lack of faith in the power and efficacy of language. Poythress notes that “some people think that language is not capable of being a channel for God to communicate with us. They conclude that the Bible’s message must be *merely* human. Or if it nevertheless somehow becomes a channel for God, all kinds of hindrances in language result in poor or garbled communication”

Such people are still caught in the throes of Babel's curse and have not yet learned the Trinitarian tongue that dispels the darkness of unbelief.

Here, I hope to have gathered some embers for the global church to build upon. As the flame of the global church grows, we must keep the Trinity at the forefront of our attention. And language, as a divine behavior that we image analogically, must be there as well. We are linguistic creatures living in a linguistic world that was spoken into being by the triune linguistic God of the Bible.

Language and the Trinity: here we will gather; here we will grow into that glorious Word (Eph. 4:15–16) by whom we were made and remade. Mark yourselves, then, with the communion, efficacy, and presence of your words, and make your way toward the glow of the global church.

(Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 61). He goes on to discuss the influence of structural linguistics and the conclusions that some have drawn in secular fields that language is a contextual, significance-imprisoning medium, which would mean that God's "truth" in the Bible has significance for people in that particular time period in history, but is certainly not objectively or transcendentally true for us today. For a selected history of this in modern and contemporary theology, see Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 38–195. Vanhoozer's discussion of "users" and "undoers" (pragmatists and deconstructionists) is particularly helpful today.