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THE GREAT LIE

What All of Hell Wants You To Keep Believing

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS



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I

AN ALLEGORY FOR HUMANITY

A long time ago, a man and a woman lived in a great house and tended a great garden. They rose just before the sun came up each morning. As the light gilded the garden, painting the green with gold, they worked with joy. They pressed their hands into the dark, damp earth. They selected and sowed seeds, tamped and watered sprouts, and the prints of their fingers were marked with holy soil. All day they tended to the plants, spreading growth by the soul in their skin. After the sun had set, they would sleep under pure, burning stars, and rise again to a new day.

They loved to tend the plants, but not just for the work itself. They loved doing it because someone tended *with* them. They called him “the Great One.” They could not see him much of the time, though they had inklings that he was always just behind them, beneath them, beside them. They could always hear him, not in a common tongue, but in a language of adoration, love, and beauty, a whistling in the wind. They knew he was always present, always sounding himself to them. Everything they saw, smelled, touched, tasted, heard, spoke, and thought seemed to call their attention to the Great One rushing through the atmosphere, this loving and mysterious helper, their garden king. They were everywhere assured of and fulfilled by his company. So they woke each morning eager

to work with him. They ran into the fields, calling his name, and listening for the whistle in the wind.

But one day, things changed. A black mist entered the great garden and began whispering in the same wind. They could not make out his words at first, but then the woman heard a sound clearly when she was off by herself. “Steal.” They did not know what this sound meant, so they continued to work and rest as usual. But unrest was growing heavy in them, like a stone in their chest.

When the woman was by herself again, tending to the most beautiful tree in the garden—with silver bark and broad, heart-shaped leaves—the black mist whispered again: “Alone.” She didn’t know the meaning of that word either . . . until that very moment. Even then, she didn’t *know* it, but she could *feel* it. It felt like an absence, as if the Great One were not behind her anymore, not drifting all around her. In that moment, nothing, not even the tree of beauty, drew her adoration and joy. Instead, the garden seemed mute and cold. And it was *there*—when the woman stopped believing in the presence of the Great One, that the garden began to disappear, tree by tree and plant by plant, along with the great house. All faded into the atmosphere.

She and the man awoke to find themselves in another place, a green country they had never been in before—beautiful still, but foreign. Yet they were most discomforted by one thing: they strained to hear voicings of the Great One in the wind; it took great effort and patience to make out any whistlings from him. And so they often believed in that little word they once felt

from the black mist: *alone*. Their children and their childrens' children believed the same. Generation upon generation grew up in this new land nearly deaf to the voicings of the Great One.

But the Great One was not gone. In fact, he was still all around them, ever before their blinded eyes, ever within their ear canals clogged with distraction. They were deceived by the black mist, though even that seemed like a dream to them now. Had they ever really been anywhere other than where they were right now? Hadn't the world always been this quiet?

This is how the great lie was born, the lie that the Great One was not there, when he was truly everywhere, even in the presence of the man and woman when they believed it was only the two of them, standing before the tree of beauty. It was the lie of *alone*.

We are still believing the lie.

GOD'S PRESENCE THROUGH SPEECH

You and I are in a predicament, aren't we? We can't sense God physically, and we have trouble sensing him spiritually, so we *feel* as if God isn't here. As I write this, I'm sitting in my kitchen at the counter. I can hear the hum of the refrigerator. I can see the amber, illuminated wires in our hanging lights, just above the breakfast bar. I can smell the dull air that hangs in the quiet room—pine wood and the ghost of old bread. My left elbow and forearm feel the cool marble of the dark countertop. I taste the bitterness of black coffee.

Not one of these senses gives me direct awareness of God. My senses tell me I am *alone*. The great lie, introduced in the allegory, centers on that phenomenon, the *feeling* that God is not omnipresent, that he is not with me everywhere I go.

Now, if you and I believe that lie—and we all fall into unholy belief at times—there's no telling what we might do. For our ancient ancestors, Adam and Eve, the great lie encouraged them to disobey the God who loved them—the Great One. In one monumental act of rebellious confusion, Adam and Eve took what he said not to take in order to become what they could never be.

Think about Eve's situation for a moment. If God were physically present when Eve was tempted—if he were sitting

right in front of her in a tangible form, as an old man—would she have eaten the forbidden fruit?

I know, I'm speculating. But in this case I believe speculation is biblically permissible and beneficial. There's no mention of God when Eve is confronted by the serpent in Genesis 3. Readers could easily but wrongly infer that God is somewhere else, letting Adam and Eve live on their own for a bit. But he wasn't somewhere else. He *couldn't* be somewhere else. He was right there; he was present, because he's *always* present.

How was he present? That's a question with great gravity. In fact, if we have no answer to that question, we're in a world of trouble, and we may not even know it. If you're reading this right now and don't have an answer, you may be having a hard time believing in God's presence in your own life. You may be functionally living as if God were *not* omnipresent. And to live that way is a lie, *the great lie*, and all of hell is bent on your continual belief in it. If Satan and his marauding minions can get you to believe that God isn't really present, they've won half the battle. The rest of that battle focuses on you *acting* in light of that lie.

We're going to delve into some theology in this book. It may seem abstract at times, but I don't want that to intimidate you. Nor do I want you to think that this is a book primarily about ideas. This is an immensely practical book, grounded in realities that you live through each day. But to get to the practical applications, we need to wade through some theological thickets. As we wade, I promise we'll end up with applications that can dramatically change your spiritual life. You may even

see changes today, if you're looking for them.

The truth I want to introduce in this chapter will sound very abstract, but if you can open yourself to it, I think it'll change your perspective on God's presence. It will give you a sliver of light to follow out of the dark room of disbelief—disbelief that God is present, that he sees and cares for you in this very moment, that his love and faithfulness are following you around everywhere you go, more graciously and mercifully loyal than any golden retriever. God is always in the room.

Now, let's get to it. It's time to re-envision the presence of God so we can assault the great lie wherever and whenever it confronts us.

Spoken Presence

In this book, we're going to speak together. I was going to say I'm about to "argue" for something, but we don't have to be that formal. We're talking, you and I, and it's a talk that's going to have implications. In fact, the reason I'm presenting this whole book as a conversation is that God, in a way, presents his presence to us *as* a conversation and *in* a conversation.

So, here's how I'm going to start the conversation: *God is always present with us through his speech.* He's present in other ways as well, but I'm focusing on this truth with you in the following pages. We're going to unpack it, but let me explain why I'm starting this way.

First, this is what the Bible teaches, and I believe the Bible is God's word, wholly true and trustworthy.

Second, God is a Spirit (John 4:24), and so the typical

criteria we use to judge whether or not someone is present (i.e., our physical senses) don't usually apply.¹

Third, while this conversation starter might seem like a letdown for people excited about a practical book, it's actually very encouraging. Our physical senses are limited in what they can perceive. Having God present through his speech means that such limitations melt away. We can *know* that God is present everywhere even though we might not *sense* him. Our knowledge of the truth glides on thermals far above the senses. That's good news, even if it's initially frustrating. Let me say it one more time, because this gets lost on us. *It's good news that God is an invisible Spirit and is present with us through his speech.*

*We can know that God is present
everywhere even though we might not
sense him.*

Now, in order to get at how God is present through his speech, we have to know something about the nature of God. As I've written elsewhere, God is a speaking God.² He speaks to

1. I say "usually" because Scripture reveals theophanies of God, where he presents himself in a physical form to his people. But these theophanies had a special place and purpose in the story of redemption. The final and ultimate theophany for us is the incarnation, where God takes on human flesh and then dwells in us by his Holy Spirit through faith. For an introduction to theophany, see Vern Poythress's *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

2. Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *The Speaking Trinity & His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018). See also Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

himself in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These divine persons speak to each other using what I call *communion behavior*—language. This language is of the highest order. It’s a language of mutual love and glorification. The Father, Son, and Spirit naturally love and glorify one another without end. If this seems above your head, that’s okay. It’s above my head, too. I can state it, but I can’t understand it. I can worship God for it, but I can’t analyze it. It’s okay for truth to be above us. In fact, that’s where Christ is, and Christ is the truth (John 14:6).

Scripture also tells us that the Son is the Word of the Father (John 1:1)—easily my favorite metaphor of all time. Whenever the Father speaks, he speaks the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. This should already be mind-blowing. How does God speak a person? How does he speak himself? I don’t know. Again, truth is above us. It condescends to greet us, but it constantly draws us up higher, never content to leave us on the ground. As Aslan said to the children in *Chronicles of Narnia*, the truth is meant to lead us “further up and further in.” In this case, the truth is that God’s speech is utterly personal because the very content of God’s eternal speech *is* a person—the person of the Son. When God speaks, he speaks himself to us, and when we receive his words, we receive *him*.

Remember Jesus’s teaching to his disciples? “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me” (Matt. 10:40). Receive the word of God, and you receive God himself. God lives in you through words. Words link you to Christ. Words link you to the Father. Words link you to the Spirit. Words are one of the primary means of receiving

the presence of God.

So, when this speaking God uses words to utter all things into being (Gen. 1) and to sustain all things by “the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3), he’s using a behavior derived from his very nature. God’s eternal speech is the ground of his temporal speech. The intimately personal character of divine speech—its “Son-centeredness”—remains when God uses language to create, sustain, and govern the world we live in.

Have I gone too far into the theological ether already? Do you feel like we’re staring at the sun? It’s okay if you feel that way. I do, too. This is lofty stuff. But believe me, this is essential to grasp because it introduces how the invisible, impalpable Spirit of God deep down inside us is present with us. This is the life-changing truth of Scripture.

To make this more palatable, let me break down this spoken presence into two different types. If you have some theological background, these types correspond to *general* and *special* revelation.

Creation Speech

Let’s call the first type creation speech. Not sure what this is? Look around you. The entire created world is a type of speech from God. In Romans 1, Paul tells us that God has revealed himself in “the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20). That’s *everything*. Everything in the world reveals God, reveals something about his nature and dealings with us.³ In this sense,

3. This was my focus in *Finding God in the Ordinary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

we might say that everything in the world “speaks” of God. Nature is a sort of word from God. Jonathan Edwards wrote, “As the system of nature, and the system of revelation, are both divine works, so both are in different senses a divine word. Both are the voice of God to intelligent creatures, a manifestation and declaration of himself to mankind.”⁴ Nature is not the same type of word to us as God’s verbal revelation (which we’ll get to next). And we should always be careful to set apart the primacy of God’s verbal revelation for our knowledge and salvation. Still, that doesn’t keep us from understanding the natural world as a sort of speech from God.

In short, because everything created has something to reveal about God, something to say about him, and because it is the very speech of God that made and sustains all things, we can say that God is present with us through his speech, the speech of creation.

*The great lie is that God is not
everywhere and always present in his
world.*

I’ll be the first to admit this is tough to grasp. We’re so prone to believing that the world is “just there.” The world appears to be a neutral, rather impersonal place, doesn’t it? We often

4. 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.

feel alone. At least, we don't feel as if God is speaking to us everywhere, constantly revealing himself in the things that he's made. We don't feel a call to divine conversation simply by walking to the mailbox each day. But—*please* hear this—that is the great lie at work in our hearts. The great lie, delivered in ancient times by a slithering serpent and woven into the tapestry of human history, is that God is not everywhere and always present in his world. But he is. He *is*. We'll look at the biblical origins of this great lie in another chapter.

Pause with me to consider something about speech. *Speech requires relationship*. To hear the speech of another, we must have a sort of relationship with that person. This is obvious with humans, since our relationship is already established by our common nature. Right now, I can literally hear and see my three-year-old scribbling circles into a notebook ten feet away. We have a common nature; we both hold crayons with our fingers and press them into paper the same way. But it's not like that with God; we bear God's *image*, but we don't share his *nature*.

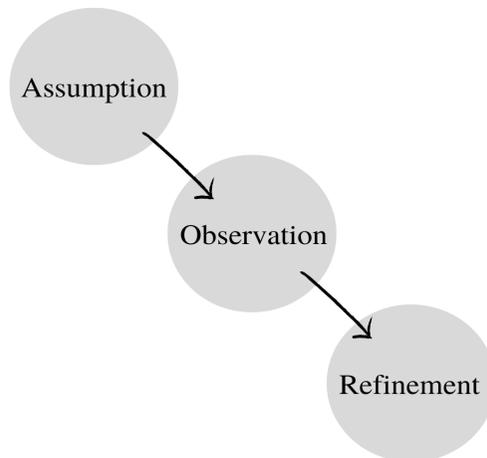
Take another example. When my wife says, "Good morning" to me, I don't have to work hard to trust that she's speaking to me. We have a deep relationship—not just of two humans who share a common nature, but as husband and wife. Nevertheless, there's a sense in which I must trust that she's speaking to me. When I talk with her on the phone, this becomes more prominent. I can't see her or touch her, but I can hear her voice, and so I trust, I believe, that she is really speaking to me. There's an element of trust, of faith, at the

heart of language.

This applies to God’s spoken presence on a deeper level. Because God is a Spirit, I can’t see him or touch him. But he has given us spiritual ears (cf. Isa. 6:9–10) to hear what he says. He’s given us ears to hear what he is saying about himself through the world around us (Rom. 1:20; Ps. 19:1–4). He’s given us ears to hear his revelation. And if our spiritual ears are unstopped by the redeeming work of God’s Son and the sanctifying work of the Spirit, then we’re in the perfect position to trust that he’s speaking to us, and thus that he’s present with us. But our trust, our faith, is required. For we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). We won’t accept God’s presence apart from faith in him, faith in his words, faith in his spoken presence. And without faith in God’s spoken presence, we’re left with the great lie.

Interpreting the Speech of Creation

But how exactly do we hear God’s voice in the world around us and take comfort in his spoken presence? Let me start by giving you a model and then a few simple examples to flesh it out.



I've broken the model down into three steps: We start with an *assumption*, then move to *observation*, and then a *refinement* of our observation with Scripture. I should say, however, that my assumptions and observations are shaped by Scripture from the outset. Over time, yours will be as well, if they aren't already.

Start with a very important *assumption*: everything in the world reveals God. Everything—your mother's hair, the row of pine trees outside your window, the cotton shirt you're wearing. Everything. That truth is made abundantly clear in Romans 1:20, and it's reinforced by passages such as Psalm 19:1–4. We don't just *hope* God is revealed in something we see around us; we *know* he is. We have to start there. We grip that revealed truth with white-knuckled tenacity.



Now, make any observation you like. Really—anything at all. Take your dog, for instance. Here’s our old dog, Buckley (may he rest in peace).⁵ I observed him sleeping on the couch many afternoons, buried in pillows and wrapped in blankets like royalty. His sleep reveals something about the character of God. What, exactly? Sabbath rest? Peace? We need a biblical perspective, a microscope given by God himself that shows us more deeply what Buckley’s sleep is pointing us to, so we move on to refinement.

For *refinement*, we ask, “What does Scripture tell us about sleep and rest?” Well, God was the first one who rested, modeling it for us (Gen. 2:1–2). And he sets apart a day of rest as holy. In fact, in Exodus 31:13, God says something quite profound (as he always does; he can’t help himself). “You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you.’” Do you see the purpose for Sabbath rest? It’s *sanctification*, our being made holy. Isn’t that fascinating? Most of us only go as far as to say that rest is for our relaxation. The latter is certainly true, but why did *God* rest? Why does he call us to do the same? There’s mystery here, and more than one answer. But we at least know that God didn’t need to relax; he’s all-powerful. And sure, maybe he was just modeling rest for us so that we’d see our God-given limits. But God is also utterly holy, and perhaps his rest at the end of creation is a portrait of that holiness, complete and content in itself. That would make some

5. Photo Credit: Tobias Hibbs Photography.

sense out of Exodus 31:13. We rest so that we may know that God sanctifies us, that the holy one is making us holy when we pause, when we stop, when we lay down. Rest, in other words, is a part of our being made more like God. When we stop, when our strivings cease, when we close our eyes, God doesn't stop working; he continues. Some of God's great work happens when your eyes are closed! Take a nap on that.

Let's go back to Buckley sleeping on the couch. Buckley isn't an image bearer of God, so he's not being sanctified in his sleep. (If he had been, I would've found fewer chewed up crayons underneath the dining room table.) However, his sleep is related to the rest that all animate creatures need in God's world. *His* need for sleep reminds me of *my* need for sleep. But my need for sleep also brings out my need for continual sanctification. Buckley sleeps to rest his tired frame; I sleep so that God might conform me to his name.

A daydreaming dog can serve to remind us of a Christ-conforming God.

So, Buckley sleeping on the couch is a sign pointing to the sanctification that results from rest—a holiness project for which God is wholly responsible. A daydreaming dog can serve to remind us of a Christ-conforming God who shapes and molds us even in our sleep to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29). This is an example of *creation speech*. Something in the natural world revealed the character and work of God to me. God is present with me when I assume, observe, and refine because I'm doing

all of that with his speech. God is present and speaks to me through the things that he's made. But I can't understand the things that he's made or what he might be communicating to me through them apart from his verbal revelation in Scripture.

How about one more example? Outside my window is a silver maple tree, whose main trunk splits into three as it climbs higher into the sky, reaching into the expanse like a prayer. A summer breeze is pushing the limbs back and forth. The papery leaves are turning on their stems and rubbing against one another. And as I look through the gaps in the foliage, I can see a strong blue sky. Is God speaking to me? It's taken me years to understand that the answer to that question is *always* yes.

The elements that I observe aren't "just there." Nothing in the world is. They've been spoken into existence by God and are upheld by divine language, by the word of God's power (Heb. 1:3). God has a purpose for that tree, and the purpose is both simple and profound: to reveal his nature and character. What is this tree revealing, specifically? Consider a few things. Again, note the stages of assumption, observation, and refinement, this time in a trinitarian context.

First, the trunk of the tree, as a strong and stable base, reflects the strength and stability of our heavenly Father, for in him there is no variation or change (James 1:17). At the creaturely level, that tree trunk has a characteristic derived from the God who spoke creation into being. I look at that maple tree and say, "Thank you, Father, that you are immovable. Thank you for always remaining the same when the winds of change keep blowing through my life." Is God *really* saying this to me,

that he's strong and stable and immovable? Is this really the content of his revelation through that tree? I have to trust him, to take him at his worded world, and measure the message I think I've received against the teaching of Scripture. I interpret *creation speech* through the *special speech* of Scripture. And when I do, I find it easier to acknowledge God's presence in the world around me. Remember that the world isn't mute; it pours forth speech (Ps. 19:1–4). Am I insane for claiming to have “heard” it, or is the rest of the unbelieving world insanely deceived by the great lie? The latter seems more likely, since the great lie would suggest that God's world is mute because God isn't present in it; he's not always and everywhere revealing himself through it. Scripture tells a different story.

Second, the summer breeze pushing the limbs back and forth, rubbing the paper leaves together, reflects the dynamism and movement of the Son of God. As the Word of the Father, the Son is God expressed, God in communicative action. The tree limbs and leaves move because they display a characteristic derived from God's Son. I look at the limbs and leaves and say, “Thank you, God, for always being active and engaging. Thank you for moving not just in the world, but in my soul.” The movement of the tree is not at odds with the stability of the trunk. Rather, it is a distinct but essentially related part of the tree.⁶

Third, the gaps in the foliage revealing patches of blue sky

6. Note in my language here the gap between creation and the Creator. We can't say that a divine person is “part” of God, since God is simple and has no parts. This is an analogy, not an equation. And all analogies break down eventually, especially those regarding God.

reflect the context of the tree in its immediate environment. Analogously, the Holy Spirit is the context for the Father-Son relationship. The third member of the Trinity is the personal, loving context for the Father and the Son. So, there is context for the maple tree ultimately because there is context in the Trinity. The context of the tree is a display of a characteristic derived from God the Spirit. I look at the gaps in the foliage and say, “Thank you, God, for holding so much in harmonious relationship. Thank you for the great and deep context of the world, and for putting all things in the context of yourself (Acts 17:28).

As we already noted, this is related to the fact that God spoke and continues to sustain this tree, and every other one on the face of the earth. It’s not just that God created things through his speech; it’s that they continue to find their identity *in* that speech. As N. D. Wilson put it, “He’s not merely calling [a tree] into existence, though His voice creates. His voice is its existence. That thing in your yard, that mangy apple or towering spruce, that thing is not the referent of His word. It is His word and its referent. If He were to stop talking, it wouldn’t be there.”⁷ Mysterious, isn’t it, that God’s speech creates, defines, and sustains all things? That’s the God-governed world we live in.

These reflections on my dog and the maple tree, examples of God’s creation speech, might sound strange to you. Perhaps what I’ve said even sounds arbitrary. Can these things really

7. N. D. Wilson, *Notes from the Tilt-a-Whirl: Wide-Eyed Wonder in God’s Spoken World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 43.

reflect God's spoken presence in the world? Am I guilty of perceiving merely what I want to perceive?

I answer these questions by returning to the earlier truths we uncovered in Scripture. If God spoke an ever-revealing world into existence, and if that world is, in a sense, always speaking about him (Rom. 1:20; Ps. 19), don't we *have* to say something about what God is revealing to us about himself in the world around us? Isn't that a biblical requirement?

*God is always addressing you through
the world.*

The other option, as I see it, is to suggest that creation does *not* everywhere reveal the presence of God, that creation is mute when it comes to the God who made it. In other words, there are places in the world where God is not truly present *as the revealer*, as the one about whom the whole world must sing—rock, reed, and river. That, my friend, is the great lie, and I will *not* believe it. Don't believe it either. No matter what you feel, what you think, where your alleged reason takes you, don't give in. God is present all around you. He's always addressing you through the world. Even a silver maple tree can reveal profound things about the nature and workings of God. The three-personed Lord of creation is always right in front of us; our vision and hearing is just too poor to sense him. But the Spirit can help us grow stronger, to grasp by faith what we cannot hold by reason.

Let's recap the first type of God's spoken presence before we move on to the second. God has used speech to create

and sustain the world (Gen. 1:1; Heb. 1:3). That speech is an analogue, an echo of the eternal Word of the Father. So, when God spoke and continues to sustain the world by that speech, there's a profound sense in which he is personally present through it, in the constant, sweeping atmosphere of Son-centered, Spirit-driven discourse.

Now, all of creation is God's worded world; that is, it everywhere reveals him (Rom. 1:20) and in that sense "speaks" about him. So, if we have the spiritual ears to hear it, we can interpret the speech of God in the world around us by using the model proposed earlier (assume, observe, refine). We need faith to do this, but God has always given this faith to his people through the work of the Spirit. This makes perfect sense, since all language-based relationships require a sort of faith or trust. If we reject this and live as if God is not everywhere present in the world he's made, then we're in the shadow of the great lie.

God's Special Speech

The second type of God's spoken presence is the most critical, since it's the only thing that leads to our salvation and our ability to interpret the first type of spoken presence. This is God's spoken presence in Scripture, what theologians call *special revelation*. I'm calling it God's *special speech*.

God is present in his verbal revelation to his people, the Bible. We've always needed this verbal revelation. We needed it even before sin entered the world. God verbally revealed himself to Adam and Eve in the garden, telling them what they needed to do. He told them to exercise dominion and

stewardship, to multiply and rule over the world (Gen. 1:28–29). And in what theologians call *theophany*—God’s physical manifestations among his people—God even appears to have walked and talked with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8).

This brings us back to the truth that God is present in his word, which is hard to comprehend but clear throughout Scripture. In Adam McHugh’s language,

When we speak a word it rushes out of our mouths and vanishes, but when God speaks a word his very presence is carried along with it. God is never separate from his word. God’s word is saturated and penetrated by God himself—his being, power and wisdom—so much so that you get a word that is presence. It starts to make sense why the Gospel of John refers to Jesus, the eternal Son, as the Word of God. When you have words filled with the very being of God, you have a Word that *is* God.⁸

God is always present with his words, and he’s given us his words in verbal revelation.

God’s spoken presence in this verbal revelation underscores something profound but often overlooked: we’re creatures built for *communion*, and that communion presents itself from the outset of our existence in the call of language—in its ability to bring us closer to each other. It’s a call out of the self and into another, into *relationship*. For it’s only through relationship

8. Adam McHugh, *The Listening Life: Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 94.

that we were meant to live. I love Geerhardus Vos on this point. He says that our being made in God’s image means that we’re always bent towards communion with him.⁹ Elsewhere he writes, “To be a Christian is to live one’s life not merely in obedience to God, nor merely in dependence on God, not even merely for the sake of God; it is to stand in conscious, reciprocal fellowship with God, to be identified with him in thought and purpose and work, to receive from him and give back to him in the ceaseless interplay of spiritual forces.”¹⁰ Do you see his focus on communion with God, on relationship?

*Through language, God called us out
of ourselves and into a relationship
with him.*

Let me explain this a bit more. Our perception of and engagement with the world was designed to come out of our relationship with God, a relationship established through language, which I call *communion behavior*.¹¹ In our verbal interactions with the God who spoke first, we would come to see the purpose of creation (to glorify and reflect God) and our

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

10. Geerhardus Vos, “Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1980), 186.

11. I develop this more fully in *The Speaking Trinity & His Worded World*, but you can also find a concise introduction to the idea here: <http://piercetaylorhibbs.com/what-is-language-communion-behavior/>.

place within it as image bearers. Through language, God called us out of ourselves and into a relationship with him. We were meant to do *everything* in the context of this spoken relationship. It was to be our vantage point for reality. But this vantage point, because of the great lie, would be forgotten in the fall, which is the topic of the next chapter. For now, it's enough to remember that our verbally established and maintained communion with God was (and still is) central to who we are.

But how was God present with us through this verbal communion? It's difficult for us to imagine because on this side of the fall, our communication can seem void of personal presence. But we must remind ourselves constantly of two biblical truths: (1) Sin has changed things, and (2) God's verbal communication is of a different quality than human verbal communication. We speak as *creatures*; God speaks as the *Creator*. What might this mean in the context of our current conversation?

Keeping in mind what we noted earlier about God's speech being Son-centered, we can say that when God speaks, there's a mysterious sense in which he speaks *himself*. This is very strange, but deeply *personal*. In eternity, the Father utters the eternal Word, the divine Son, in the hearing of the Spirit. We infer this from various passages in the Gospel of John (1:1; 16:13).

Now, we might naturally wonder what this means, and rightly so. We're heading back up into the theological ether, aren't we? What does it mean for God to speak *himself to himself*, for the Father to speak the Son in the hearing of the Spirit? We're at the borders of human understanding here, but we can

at least say this: *God is a community unto himself*. He is, as Herman Bavinck once put it, not an impersonal monad—an impersonal essence—but a fountain of life and relationship.¹² God, in himself, *speaks*. I love how Douglas Kelly put it: “The fact that the eternal Son of the Father is called Word or *Logos*, seems to mean, among other things, that there is—and has been from all eternity—talk, sharing and communication in the innermost life of God. The true God is not silent; He talks.”¹³ God speaks not only to us, but to himself. Speech is part of who God *is*, not simply part of what he does. So, when we say that the Father speaks the Son in the hearing of the Spirit, we’re saying that God speaks himself to himself in a community of love and glory. He is his own community. Thus, when it comes to God’s presence, whenever God speaks (which is all the time, in the deeper sense), he is present with that speech, for that speech comes from God, through the Son.

Summary

I know, I know—this all sounds horribly abstract. We went from a lighter discussion about God’s presence to what may seem like a rabbit hole on divine metaphysics.¹⁴ But it’s not a

12. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 308–309; Ralph A. Smith, *Trinity and Reality: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2004), 72.

13. 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.

14. If you’re interested in more metaphysics from this perspective, I recommend Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions*

rabbit hole, I promise. We're laying the groundwork here for our assault against the great lie.

I've summarized this before, but I'm doing it again here because it's so critical. We need to chisel it into the stone of our mind. When God speaks to create, govern, and sustain the world (Gen. 1; Heb. 1:3, Col. 1:17), that speech is an analogue, an image or echo, of his eternal speech, his eternal Son. There's a clear correlation between the speech God utters in Genesis and the speech that he simply is (John 1:1). The two are not identical; they're analogous. The words that God utters outside himself rely for their meaning and stability on God himself.¹⁵ That means those words evoke God's personal presence. And because these words are always being "spoken," for God always governs and sustains all things through his speech, God is present *everywhere and all the time* through speech. That's God's *creation speech*, the first type of spoken presence we looked at.

Scripture is God's holy conversation with his people.

However, what's even more amazing is that, within a world that's filled with God's spoken presence, we're also personally addressed by God in his verbal revelation, in Scripture. Scripture is God's holy conversation with his people. Though complex

(Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

15. See Vern S. Poythress, "God and Language" in *Did God Really Say? Affirming the Truthfulness and Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed. David B. Garner (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 102–104.

and variegated, the Bible is one long conversation, one long act of communion, one long heart-felt message of fellowship, one embrace of reconciliation. And God is present with his words in Scripture as gracious and loving. You won't find that in the natural world. Herman Bavinck was clear on that: If you want grace and forgiveness, don't walk into the woods; walk into the word.¹⁶ It's there that you will find Christ on every page, as God speaks to reconcile himself to us.¹⁷

In Scripture, we might appear to see merely human language. I see the same thing that you see: verbs and prepositions and nouns and adjectives. But that language is composed of words that rest upon the eternal Word for their meaning at every moment. They are words for our redemption, and they are the only words that stamp out a path to salvation with God at our side. So, once again, God is present through language—a spoken presence. And yet Scripture is much more than this.

Scripture: More Than Spoken Presence

Scripture isn't just the spoken presence of God; it's God's actual speech (2 Pet. 1:21; 2 Tim. 3:16). "The Bible is God's speech in written form."¹⁸ We can't ever understate its brilliance. When we hold the Bible in our hands, we're holding the very speech of God! We're holding a holy conversation, a direct verbal

16. Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 312–314.

17. Peter A. Lillback, ed., *Seeing Christ in All of Scripture: Hermeneutics at Westminster Theological Seminary* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2016).

18. Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 27.

address from the God of our spinning solar system. Scripture is unparalleled; it's in its own category. And it's the only thing that can save us from the great lie that God isn't fully present with us.

Remember, we live in the country of the great lie, where we imagine the Great One is absent. Until God's Spirit revives us through hearing the word (Rom. 10:14), we're walking dead (Eph. 2:1); our spirits are fish out of water, longing for a God-atmosphere (which we live in and yet rebel against at the same time; cf. Acts 17:28).

It's equally true that, though spiritually dead, all people really do know God exists and is present. What are people doing as they possess that knowledge? They're *suppressing* it; they're pushing it down to the ocean-bed of their hearts.¹⁹ Currents of the world roll over it, and life teems above it in feigned ignorance, but it's still there. It can't leave. It's the foundation.

*We live in the lie. We need to be reborn
in order to hear and see properly, in
order to live in the truth.*

Paul says, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it

19. K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles & Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), chap. 1.

to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:18–20). Deep down, on the ocean-bed of every human heart, people know that God exists and is present, but because of the great lie and our tacit belief in it, we suppress that truth. Until the Holy Spirit shatters that lie for us, as we come to faith in Jesus Christ and believe that God truly is speaking to us (in nature and in Scripture), we don’t fully realize or appreciate God’s presence. We live in the lie. We need to be reborn in order to hear and see properly, in order to live in the truth (John 3; John 14:6; 1 John 1:6).

Recall the encounter of Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3. Jesus told Nicodemus that he *must* be born again. He must be born by the power of the Spirit. He must enter into an entirely new perception of reality. In that new perception, Nicodemus would not only be able to identify Jesus as the Son of God; he would also begin to see the great lie fracture and dissolve. For it was Jesus himself who resounded the Old Testament truth of God’s presence: “And behold, I am with you always” (Matt. 28:20; cf. Heb. 13:5). Jesus was God’s presence incarnate, standing right in front of Nicodemus!

We’ll talk more about Christ as the answer to the great lie in a later chapter. For now, we do well to note that our ability to perceive and live faithfully in God’s presence is an act of God. And it has to be, since we’re bent on suppressing the truth that God has revealed about himself. The shell of our suppression cracks against the granite of God’s word, where we learn about

the God who gave all of himself to be present with us forever.

What God's Spoken Presence Means

Our conversation has only just begun. While we could say more about God's spoken presence, we'll save that for the chapters ahead. Let's summarize where we've been in this chapter so that it's fresh in our minds for the next one. We'll need it fresh when we look at the great liar, Satan himself, and how the great lie was introduced.

Because God is a Spirit (John 4:24), we can't usually perceive or confirm his presence by ordinary means (the human senses). God's presence goes beyond our senses. His presence can be understood in various ways, but in this book we're looking at God's presence as a *spoken presence*.

What exactly does this mean? First, it means that we need to start by acknowledging the centrality of speech to God's identity. In God, speech *is* a person, the eternal Son, the Word of the Father, spoken *by* the Father *to* the Spirit (cf. John 16:13). God speaks himself to himself (remember that theological ether?), and this is simply part of who he is. John Frame has argued convincingly from Scripture that *speech* is an essential attribute of God.²⁰ It's not just what he does; it's who he is.

Second, it means that God is present in and through the world, with and in his people, through creation speech. I love how one author described our world: "The world cannot exist

20. John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 522–523.

apart from the voice of God. It is the voicings of God.”²¹ As the voicings of God, creation is saturated with God’s presence, for the voice of the Father is the Son, the eternal Word, uttered in the breath of the Holy Spirit. God is thus present in the world because every fiber and fleck of it floats on the thermals of his breath.

Third, it means that God is present in a special way through Scripture, which is the very speech of God in written form. Whenever we read the Bible, we hear God’s voice, and God is personally addressing us as we read. This personal address calls us out of the great lie and enables us to acknowledge God’s presence all around us. Apart from this *special speech*, we lack the ability to perceive and properly interpret God’s *creation speech*. Apart from the saving message of the gospel, infused in us by the Holy Spirit, we wander in the great lie.

Different Types of God’s Presence

Before ending the chapter, we need to make an important distinction between what we might call God’s *personal presence* and God’s *omnipresence* (his presence everywhere). After all, there are scads of passages in Scripture that talk about God’s presence as something that *is* with one person or group of people and is presumably *not* with another, or at least not in the same way (Gen. 3:8; 21:22; 39:2; Exod. 33:14–16; Deut. 4:7; 20:1; Josh. 1:9; Joel 3:21; Zech. 8:23; 2 Thess. 1:9). There are other passages that portray God’s presence as a special

21. Wilson, *Notes from the Tilt-a-Whirl*, 98.

blessing (Pss. 16:11; 73:28). There are still others that locate God's presence in a geographic area (Eccles. 5:2), such as in the tabernacle and temple (Exod. 40:34; 2 Chr. 5:14; 7:1–2; Hab. 2:20). How are we to make sense of this? How can God be omnipresent, such as he's described in Psalm 139:7–12, and yet be with some people and not with others, or be in certain places and not in others?

The Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper addressed this in his discussion of the Holy Spirit. He makes it an issue of *matter* vs. *spirit*.

That which applies to matter does not therefore apply to spirit. God's omnipresence has reference to all space, but not to every spirit. Since God is omnipresent, it does not follow that He also dwells in the spirit of Satan. Hence it is clear that the Holy Spirit can be omnipresent without dwelling in every human soul; and that He can descend without changing place, and yet enter a soul hitherto unoccupied by Him; and that He was present among Israel and among the Gentiles, and yet manifested Himself among the former and not the latter.²²

For Kuyper, God's omnipresence applies to the material world, while his spiritual presence moves in the spiritual realm. What Kuyper is calling God's "spiritual presence" is what I'm calling God's personal presence. When Kuyper speaks of

22. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 1995), 128.

God's omnipresence in reference to matter, you can think of God's creation speech, his spoken presence with reference to all of creation. God's spiritual or personal presence is tied to his special speech.

Keep this distinction in mind throughout the book as we talk about God's presence. Whenever it's appropriate, I'll remind us of this so that we get a sense of how God is present with us and what that means for us practically.

Reflection Questions and Prayer

1. In what ways have you sensed God's presence in your own life?
2. When you don't sense God's presence, how does that make you feel? What sorts of decisions do you make? Think of a specific example.
3. Do you use God's *special speech* to help you understand *creation speech*? Offer an example.
4. How does God's *spoken presence* bring you comfort regarding the instability of your senses? In other words, why is it *good* news that God's presence is a spoken presence?
5. What are the implications of living *as if* God were not everywhere and always present?

Prayer

Lord of all-consuming presence,
Father, Son, and Spirit,

I know you speak,
But I don't hear it.
Your voice is all around me,
But my ears and eyes are blocked.
Help me to believe
That you are all around me,
That you are deep inside me,
That you have ridden words
Into my heart,
And now your home is *here*.
Help me to hear your voice in nature
As I hear your voice in Scripture.
Let your special revelation
Peel the scales from my eyes
So that I see your glory
In a world brimming with beauty.