

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

LANGUAGE: OBSTACLE AND OPPURTUNITY
AN EXAMINATION OF THE PHENOMENON OF HUMAN LANGUAGE AND THE CHURCH'S APPROACH TO
THE MULTITUDE OF LANGUAGES PRESENT IN THE WORLD

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To my wife, Sarah, for her encouragement to finish what I had begun.

To my parents, for their faith and dedication to raise me to know and love the Lord.

And to my father, William Warner, for instilling in me a curiosity about God's world, a thirst for knowledge, and a desire to serve others by his own example.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Language is often noted as a key part of what it means to be human, even by non-Christian thinkers, as represented by Noam Chomsky, who writes:

When we study human language, we are approaching what some might call the “human essence,” the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man and that are inseparable from any critical phase of human existence, personal or social.¹

Today, there are 7,099 known living languages.² Wycliffe Bible Translators estimate that 600 languages have a complete translation of the Bible, 1,400 have the New Testament, 2,400 have active translation development and more than 1,600 have not yet begun to have a translation of the Bible.³

Language is a complex thing, yet it can be utilized very easily, without much thought. In every language, there are an infinite number of possible sentences that can be constructed. And we encounter new sentences that we’ve never heard before all the time. But despite that, we can understand their meaning without effort. Even when the sentences aren’t formed properly or use misspelled or mispronounced words, we can often understand their meaning.

Yet, despite the infinite nature of language, it is also rather imprecise in a sense. It can be misunderstood. Words can have more than one meaning. The context of what is being said can change the meaning of a sentence. The speaker (or writer) is only in control of a portion of the process of communicating. On the other hand, language can express truth. We can make true statements in it. This is what makes it a suitable vehicle for communicating with God.

Throughout the history of Christianity, perspectives and approaches to languages have varied. At sometimes, the diversity of language has been embraced as an opportunity, while at other times it is treated as an obstacle to the faith. In this paper, I will examine the Biblical information on language,

¹ Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 88.

² Ethnologue.com April 15, 2017.

³ <https://www.wycliffe.org/about/why> April 15, 2017

from its origins to the effects of sin on it and the importance it plays in the full plan of God. I will trace through the history the various ways the church has interacted with new languages. Finally, I will examine key theological issues as they relate to language. Through all this, I hope to examine the ways language has been not just an obstacle to the gospel, but also a great opportunity for it.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LANGUAGE

Language in the Trinity

Language is not a uniquely human phenomenon. The first spoken words recorded in the Bible belong to God, when he speaks to create the world. The fact that language exists before humans do is influential in understanding the purpose of language, since it cannot be stated that language exists purely for human-human communication. In scripture, we see examples of three pairings of communication between parties: divine-divine communication, divine-human communication, and human-human communication. It is a given that language facilitates human-human communication. And scripture is full of instances of God speaking to humans. From Moses and the burning bush to the declaration of the prophets of “thus says the Lord” God clearly uses language to speak to mankind. But the Bible also demonstrates that language is used for divine-divine communication. The persons of the Trinity communicate with one another through language. It follows then, that the purpose of language is to provide a means for all three pairs of communication and the fact that language is not simply for humans only broadens our perspective on what language is. Our familiarity with human-human and divine-human communication is a given. The text of scripture contains many instances where divine-divine communication is recorded. I shall examine some briefly here.

The Bible, and world history, begin in Genesis. And the beginning of Genesis contains the spoken words of God. Adam isn't mentioned as speaking until chapter 2, verse 20 when he names the animals. He won't have any of his words recorded until he meets Eve a few verses after that. While all the spoken words of God in Genesis are recorded for the purpose of instructing humans, the original purpose of God speaking wasn't so human ears could hear it, since they aren't yet in existence for most of it.

The role of language in creation will be examined in the next section, but for now we can note the dialogue among the Trinity in the creation of man, when Genesis 1:26 states “Then God said, ‘Let us

make man in our image, after our likeness.” There has been much discussion as to who “us” in this text refers. Possible interpretations include the heavenly court assembled before God, the Trinity, or a remnant of polytheism, as well as suggestions that “us” refers to creation in general or that “us” is used for purposes of intensification or emphasis.⁴ The idea that “us” would refer to creation or be a remnant of a polytheistic source for the text can be ruled out on theological grounds. The other possibilities require further examination of the text.

The first-person plural pronoun in God’s speech appears in three other passages in the Old Testament. In addition to the text of Genesis 1:26, they are as follows:

Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. (Genesis 3:22-23)
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. (Genesis 11:7)
And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” (Isaiah 6:8)

Genesis 3:22 is closely related to Genesis 1:26, so the proper understanding of one would influence the other greatly. It is possible in Genesis 3:22 that God is speaking to the heavenly court of angels, since nothing he suggests about “us” would preclude them from being included. Waltke suggests that all these instances would be difficult to understand as referencing the Trinity, preferring to see them as addresses to the heavenly court, which he points out is clearly the setting of Isaiah 6. He sees all four instances as situations where “human beings are impinging on the heavenly realm and he is deciding their fate.”⁵ Interestingly, Collins suggest just the opposite about Genesis 11:7. Waltke argues that it is the heavenly court that comes down to see what humans have done, while Collins argues that God alone is the actor. Collins’ argument seems to have more textual support. While the setting of

⁴ See Collins 2006, 59-61 for a discussion and view of “us” as a reference to the Trinity. See Waltke 2001, 64 for an example of the view that “us” is a reference to the heavenly court.

⁵ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Mich: 2001), 64.

Genesis 11 is that humans are attempting to reach the heavens (impinging of the heavenly court), the text is clear that God alone is the one acting. Verse 5 stated “And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.” And verse 8 states “So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.” If God was suggesting the members of the heavenly court would be involved in the actions in response to the tower, he would be immediately following that statement by being the only one to carry out the actions.

Isaiah 6 also doesn’t preclude the use of “us” as a reference to the Trinity. The text even makes a parallel connection between “I” and “us” in God’s speech. And it does become difficult to see why a messenger would be going “for the heavenly courts” instead of “for God.”

The most clarification can be gained for Genesis 1:26. There are three things of note in God’s use of the first person plural pronouns. First, the “us” of the passage is going to be carrying out an act of creation: “Let us make man...” Whoever “us” refers to is carrying out an act of creation. There is no evidence anywhere else in the text or other parts of scripture that anyone other than God was involved in the creation of the world. Angels or members of the heavenly courts do not partake in making anything.

Second, the first-person plural is used to describe what man will be like when God says, “our image.” It seems clear that “us” and “our” refer to the same group. For “us” to be a reference to the heavenly court, we’d have to conclude that man is made not just in the image of God, but in the image of the other members of the heavenly court. Angelic beings are clearly called out as not being like God in

Psalm 89:6:

For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord?
 Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord,
 a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones,
 and awesome above all who are around him?

These words are particularly with reference to God's rule and authority, the very thing God connects to human's being made in his image. Therefore, idea that man was made in the image of angels can't be supported.

Third, Genesis clearly states that the only one to create man was God. No angels took part in the action. And the text clarifies who is creating man three times:

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

"God created man... he created him... he created them." And it also notes that they are in "his own image." For "us" in verse 26 to be a reference to the heavenly court, verse 27 would have to immediately contradict the stated intentions of God. Verse 27 clearly indicates that God alone creates man and that he does so solely in his own image. Therefore, it demands that we understand verse 26 to be a reference only to the father.

Collins points out that this doesn't mean the text of Genesis 1 itself teaches the existence of the Trinity. There is no mention of how many people are included in "us." But as Collins says:

If there is any place for any kind of *sensus plenior* ("fuller sense"), this is it. The kind of *sensus plenior* that I can accept occurs when a latter passage amplifies an earlier one in a way consistent with the intent of the earlier one. If the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is true, then the referent was present in Genesis 1. This is not the same as claiming that the author or a pious Israelite reader must have been able to see it, only that the narration allows it.⁶

When the New Testament reveals more clearly in John 1 the role of the Son in the acts of creation, the identity of "us" becomes even clearer. While we can't state that this text alone teaches the existence of the Trinity, in the context of the broader teaching of Scripture, we can only conclude that Genesis 26 is a conversation between member of the Trinity about the creation of humans. Calvin reaches this same

⁶ C John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub., 2006), 61.

conclusion when he writes, “Christians, therefore, properly contend, from this testimony, that there exists a plurality of Persons in the Godhead.”⁷

There are other examples of divine-divine language in Scripture as well. During Jesus’ earthly ministry, we have recorded times where Jesus communicated with the Father. Some of these instances, such as Jesus’ teaching in the Lord’s Prayer, are as examples of how his followers were to communicate with the Father. But other instances have, at least, a main purpose of communication between two persons of the Trinity.

One instance where Jesus communicates with the Father is recorded in Matthew 26. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus goes away from his disciples to be alone and talk with the Father.

Matthew records his prayer:

And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” ... Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” (Matthew 26:39, 42)

While it seems none of the disciples were awake to hear Jesus speak these words, they are still recorded the same as any other audible speech of Jesus makes in the gospels.

And later while on the cross, as recorded in Matthew 27:46, when Jesus cries out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Or in Luke 23:46 when he says, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” Jesus communicated with the Father through language.

Communication between the persons of the Trinity via language is also evident by Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit in John 16. When Jesus explains the role of the Spirit to his disciples, he says:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books 2005), 92.

The things the Spirit will speak to the disciples are the things that “he hears.” The Spirit is hearing these things from Christ, a fact that is made plain by Jesus stating, “he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” The picture is of Christ speaking to the Holy Spirit so that the Holy Spirit can communicate them to Christ’s disciples.

John 1 presents Jesus to us as “the Word” when John writes “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John goes on to state that through “the Word” all things were created, making a connection between Jesus as “the Word” and the spoken words of God at creation in Genesis 1. In examining this, Vern Poythress writes:

Calling him “the Word” indicates a relation between the Trinitarian character of God and language. In this analogical relation, God the Father is the speaker, while God the Son is the speech, “the Word.”⁸

Poythress sees the Spirit also playing a role in this relationship of the Trinity. Building on the Hebrew word for “spirit” also meaning for “breath,” he states, “The third person of the trinity is named ‘Spirit’ partly to suggest a close relation between him and the picture of the ‘breath’ of God.”⁹ Poythress sees this as a picture of the Trinity, stating:

We can obtain a coherent picture of the of the persons of the Trinity as the origin of speech and language. God the Father is speaker, God the Son is the speech, and God the Spirit is the breath carrying the speech to its destination.¹⁰

Calvin takes special note to emphasize that, despite God’s creation of Light being the first recorded act of God speaking, the whole of Scripture reveals that God’s Word existed prior to that act. He states, “God, however, did not put forth his Word until he proceeded to originate light; because in the act of distinguishing his wisdom begins to be conspicuous.”¹¹

The fact that language is not uniquely, nor originally, human gives us a perspective on just what human language is. Poythress calls the Trinity the origin of language. Human language, then, exists

⁸ Vern Sheridan Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2009), 20.

⁹ Poythress, 20.

¹⁰ Poythress, 20.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*, 74-75.

because of the fact man is created in God's image (which is examined in more detail below). The divine origin of language means that, even without humans, language would exist. The ability for humans to speak to one another and communicate through language exists because God speaks and communicates through language. Human language is a derivative of divine, or more appropriately, Trinitarian language. And human language is therefore in integral part of what it means to be human at all.

Language as the Tool of God's Creation

Language is the tool by which God creates the world. In particular, God uses spoken words to bring about the acts of creation in Genesis 1, where each day of creation contains the phrase "God said." Genesis 1 contains eight acts of God creating by speaking through language, each of them by God's use of language. The Latin translation of Genesis 1:3 gives us the expression "divine fiat" as the mode of creation. The Hebrew word used (*אמא*) is the same commonly used throughout the Old Testament to introduce instances of speech. Wenham notes the difference of importance here as compared to other uses, even other uses regarding God speaking, when he writes:

Throughout Scripture the word of God is characteristically both creative and effective: it is the prophetic word that declares the future and helps it come into being. But in this creation narrative these qualities of the divine word are even more apparent.¹²

Likewise, Luther notes the difference between God's speech here and the speech of humans when he writes "He does not speak grammatical words. He speaks true and existent realities. Accordingly, that which among us has the sound of a word is a reality with God."¹³

While the efficacy and power of God's words is worth noting, the simple nature of them is noteworthy as well. Each of these speeches by God in Genesis 1 is recorded no differently than any other act of speaking in the Bible, even though the power of the words themselves are far reaching. God's speech is at the same time vastly different and vastly like human speech.

¹² Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 18.

¹³ Martin Luther, "Chapter 1" in *Lectures on Genesis* (trans. George V. Schick; vol. 1 of Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 21.

Genesis 1 also contains other acts of God spoken involvement in creation. He assigns terms and names to his creation on the first three days, signified by him “calling” them “Day” and “Night,” “Heaven,” “Earth” and “Seas.” God uses language to categorize and explain his own creation. God uses language to control over creation. God also speaks to extend blessings and instructions to his creation. He instructs the sea creatures and birds by tell them to “fill the waters in the seas” and “multiply on the earth.” God speaking is also how Adam is blessed and instructed by God. As Vern Poythress points out, “Language is not an alien imposition on the world but the very key to its beginning and its meaning.”¹⁴ The fact that God uses language as the means of creation signifies the significance of language, both for God and for humans.

At this point, it is helpful to look at the exact ways in which God uses speech in the work of creation. The days of creation are often analyzed by breaking them down into a pattern. A typical one is announcement, commandment, fulfillment, report, naming, evaluation, and timeframe.¹⁵ The pattern, or at least portions of it, occurs on each day of creation and occurs twice on the third and sixth day. Three parts of the pattern relate to God’s use of language: announcement, commandment, and naming.

The announcement of each act of creation emphasizes God’s role as speaker and creator. The phrase “God said” occurs a total of ten times in the first chapter of Genesis. Eight of those are the announcement of creation, while two (verse 28 and 29) announce God’s speech to humans. In each case, God is introduced as the speaker. This announcement serves to emphasize that God is the subject of the creation account. It also draws attention to the fact that these are the words of Gods, not Moses.

The commandment of each act is the literal words of God. As noted above, this is usually expressed as divine fiat. While the idea that God creates by command is true, in some of the acts of creation, command itself does not appear to be the only tool. The creation of light on the first day in Genesis 1:3 is by commandment only: “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” Verse 4

¹⁴ Poythress, 24.

¹⁵ Waltke suggest “separation” in place of “fulfillment.”

immediately tells us God's evaluation of the light. But on other days, other creative acts accompany the commandment. For example, on the second day after god said "Let there be an expanse..." the text also records "And God made the expanse. Collins notes the significance of the differences between the words "create" (arb) and "make" (hce) in the text.¹⁶ He asserts that "create" represents something new, while "make" represents God working. He argues that create is a hyponym of make. But even when God is carrying out other works as part of creation, he does so as an expression of his divine command.

The third part of the creation pattern that relates to language is God's naming of the parts of his creation. God assigns order to his creation using language. On each of the first three days of the creation week, God names the realms that he separates. The fact that God can name these realms illustrates his authority over them. It demonstrates his sovereignty of the creation.

Other parts of the Bible expand the idea of God's speaking in the act of creation. As mentioned above, John 1 puts Jesus forth as "the Word" by which all things are created. The Psalmist also expresses this idea:

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.
He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;
he puts the deeps in storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm (Psalm 33:6-9).

And it is seen in Lamentation as well:

Who has spoken and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has commanded it?
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and bad come? (Lamentations 3:37-38)

¹⁶ C John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub., 2006), 67-68.

The author of Hebrews tells us that “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” (Hebrews 11:3). And Peter also emphasizes the role of God’s word in creation:

For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. (2 Peter 3:5-7)

God’s speech is clearly viewed in these passages as the source of all things that exist. But further than that, they emphasize the role God’s word plays in maintaining creation and will play in judging his creation. God creates, controls, and judges by his speech.

Language as Part of the Image of God

From the above, it becomes obvious that if the origin of language is divine. It follows then, that the origin of human language is due to the fact man is created in the image of the divine. Genesis tells us:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”
So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

The full extent of what it means to be created in the image of God can’t be fully analyzed here. But what we can state is this: prior to this point in Genesis we have seen God exercise his authority through speech, both in creating and categorizing the created world. The first action we see Adam take is also the use of language, when he names the animals.

Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. (Genesis 2:19-20)

Just as God had assigned names to the parts of his creation in the first three days, Adam now assigns names to the parts of God's creation from the fifth and sixth days. Adam, like God, is categorizing the created world. The parallel relationship between God's use of language as creator and Adam's use of language as sub-creator is clearly due to Adam's nature. God had instructed Adam to exercise authority over the created world. "To rule" over creation was the purpose God had expressed in creating humans. The way Adam first expresses his authority and rule is through language.

The existence of human language is due to God creating mankind with certain capacities, which originate from the capacities of God himself. Man speaks because man is like God and God speaks.

Moises Silva states:

In sum, the biblical narrative presents human language not precisely as a gift created by God for Adam but as a powerful attribute that is (1) intrinsic to God's own being and activity, (2) clear evidence of the fact that Adam and Eve were distinctive creatures made in God's image, and (3) inseparable from the mandate to Adam and Eve to rule creation.¹⁷

The question can be raised whether thought¹⁸ is even possible without the human capacity for language. Chomsky writes:

The study of universal grammar, so understood, is a study of the nature of human intellectual capacities. It tries to formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions that a system must meet to qualify as a potential human language, conditions that are not accidentally true of the existing human languages, but that are rather rooted in the human "language capacity," and thus constitute the innate organization that determines what counts as linguistic experience and what knowledge of language arises on the basis of this experience.¹⁹

Non-Christian thought sees this capacity for thought arising from the course of evolutionary progress.

The Biblical understanding though is that human language exists not by chance of evolution but because

¹⁷ Moisés Silva, *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, vol. 4, *God, Language, and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1990), 26.

¹⁸ Here I define "thought" as the human act of understanding and responding to the world. In one sense, as noted by Silva, animals can be described as "thinking." But humans have a capacity for thought unique among God's physical creation.

¹⁹ Chomsky, *Language and Mind*, 24.

language is fundamental to the creation of the world. Silva even argues that Adam's expression language in naming the animals demonstrates his ability to understand them. He writes:

The point is that Adam cannot rule the earth unless he understands it, that his understanding is bound to the need for ordering what he sees, and that such ordering takes place through language.²⁰

The nature of human language also reflects the nature of divine language. In the Trinity, we saw that language each person of the Trinity was an aspect of language: speaker, word, and breath. Human language, as a derivative of that divine language, utilized by persons made in the image of the persons of the trinity, also has speaker, word, and breath. Human language works the way it does because of the nature of the very nature of Trinity.

Language in the Fall

Language is also at the root of the first sin. In the exchange between Eve and the serpent, for the first-time God is the object of language. Satan's temptation of Eve is to question or doubt God's language: "Did God really say..." Genesis quickly takes us from the powerfully nature of language as God's tool of creation to the deceitful possibilities of it in the serpent's twisting of it for his own evil means. In this instance, we see for the first time, a perversion of language. Instead of being used to create or understand God's creation, language is now being used to subvert God.

Satan is attempting to get Eve to not believe the things God has spoken. Satan exaggerates God's prohibition given to Adam and Eve. He claims that God said, "You shall not eat of any tree in the garden" in contrast to God's actual statement of "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat." God's command to Adam places the emphasis on the abundance of trees present to provide food, while the serpent's twisted version emphasizes and falsely expands the prohibition. Instead of "every tree but one" it becomes "no trees."

²⁰ Silva, *God, Language, and Scripture*, 25-26.

Satan's initial attempt is to raise question the accuracy of what God has said. He also is insinuating that God is withholding something good from her. He is using language to questions God's character.

Eve's response is to quote to Satan the words of God when she says, "but God said" in reply to his question. It is often pointed out by commentators the Eve's reply doesn't appear to be completely accurate. While she corrects the serpent's false statement about all the trees in the garden, she also adds to God's command a prohibition on touching the fruit. Some, suggest as Gordon Wenham²¹ this indicates Eve is already accepting Satan's assertions at some level, since, while she denies the serpent's harshness in terms of the scope of the prohibition, she herself expands the harshness in terms of the actions prohibited. Satan had suggested that Adam and Eve could not eat any fruit. While Eve corrects the statement to the fruit of one specific tree, she adds the prohibition of even touching it. In verse 4 the serpent moves from questioning God's word to an outright denial of it.

Throughout this passage, we see that language has a powerful capacity for evil. It can be used to deceive and confuse. It can also be used to question God's own word. James sees the capacity of language for evil use, calling the tongue "a world of unrighteousness." (James 3:6) Sin is often a distortion of God's truth. Likewise, language can be used to distort the purposes God created it for in the first place.

When God confronts Adam and Eve, we see them begin to use language in new ways. They use it to shift blame to others (verses 12 and 13). Genesis 3 also gives us the first instance of language being used as a curse. While the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 contain speech acts of God to bestow blessing, God now uses the power of his language to curse the Adam and Eve as well as the serpent.

The Confusion of Language at Babel

The account of Babel stands out as an important event in the history of human language. As recounted in Genesis 11:1, prior to Babel, all humans spoke only one language: "Now the whole earth

²¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol 1., *Genesis 1-15* (Nashville, Tenn.: 1987), 73.

had one language and the same words.” The Hebrew is literally “one lip” and “one words,” emphasizing the unity in both language and vocabulary. Waltke even points out the quoted words of these people in verse 3 is almost an alliteration, with similar sounds being repeated to emphasize the similarity of their speech.²² There is also some linguistic word play in other parts of the text. While the people desired to make a great name for themselves (verse 4), their city ends up with the name Babel, which is the Hebrew word for confusion. Even the strong use of the “b” and “l” sounds in the phrase “Come, let us make bricks” hints at the ultimate outcome of the story.

Using the strength of their common language, they set out to build a great city, with an especially great tower. God himself recognizes the potential power in their shared speech by saying “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do.” (Genesis 11:6) It is important to see here that, even with the effects of sin upon humans and creation, the power of language remains.

It is important to determine exactly what sins these people committed to understand the context of God’s actions. A few points can be noted. First, their idea to build a city was counter to God’s command to fill the earth, originally expressed to Adam in Genesis 1 and restated to Noah and his family in Genesis 9. God’s opposition was not to the idea of cities. There are numerous examples of God’s love for cities, from Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, to the picture of God’s consummated kingdom in Revelation. The problem with constructing a city was that, at this point in human history, a city meant that humans were clustering together in large number. And that would mean they weren’t following his intentions for humans. There weren’t enough people on Earth at the time to necessitate the need for a city when there was still much of the Earth to be filled. Their own statements bare this intent out when they say, “lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” (Genesis 11:4)

²² Waltke, *Genesis*, 178-179.

Second, the purpose of what they are constructing is to “make a name” for themselves. They seek their own fame and glory, as opposed to God’s. This desire for their own glory seems connected with their concern about being spread out over the earth, as if they create this city and great tower and gain glory they will somehow be safe from their fear of being dispersed. Ironically, God’s response in verse 8 to them is to do the very thing they were attempting to prevent, dispersing them all over the earth. It can also be noted that they do end up creating a name for themselves, though not in the way they intended. Verse 9 relates that the place where they were building becomes known as Babel, closely related to the Hebrew word for “confusion.”

Third, it has been noted that the goal of the tower reaching into the heavens has religious implications. The desire isn’t simply one of pure height, but to create a place of worship, though not of Yahweh. This is evident from their stated goal of the project as “a tower with its top in the heavens.” The tower of Babel has its roots in the ziggurat design of Mesopotamia. In Mesopotamian civilization, the tower often served as the temple for the city. The wrapped staircase design was viewed as a link between Heaven and earth, a way for humans to ascend to the level of the gods. For all these reasons, the design was clearly intended to create a place of worship for a God other than Yahweh.

God’s response is to confuse the language of the people and scatter them across a broader area in groups. Both have the effect of forcing the people to fulfill God’s command to fill the earth. The people go from “settled” in verse 2 to “dispersed” in verse 8. It can also be noted that the people do earn a name for themselves, though not the one they desired.

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to look in more depth at the diversification of language in this text. It can easily be assumed that God’s force diversification of language is an act of God punishing the people for their sin. Calvin takes such a stance, writing that Moses “pronounces the division of tongues to be a punishment, divinely inflicted upon men, because they impiously conspired

against God.”²³ Well common, such a view is hard to support from the text. God’s internal, Trinitarian dialogue about how to respond doesn’t seem have as its goal to devise a punishment for the people. Clearly the people are sinning by defying God’s command, glorifying themselves, and seeking the worship of other Gods. But the text doesn’t tell us that God diversified their language as punishment for these actions. Rather, it seems that God diversifies their language to curb their sin when he states, “nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” (Genesis 11:6) His concern is to make sure they aren’t capable of such large-scale acts of sin. In this light, the diversification of language is in some sense a gift from God.

This idea is further enhanced by seeing the parallel between the dispersion of the people from Babel and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. The two accounts have many parallels. Noah’s Ark precedes the account of Babel, and serves as almost a second creation story, with God cleansing the world through the Flood. In both the Fall and Babel, the backdrop is God’s command to fill the earth and subdue it. In both the sin that takes places is an attempt to become like God. For Adam and Eve, it was to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For the people of Babel, it was to build a tower that would put them in the heavens like God. And just as God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden largely to protect them from further harming themselves, God diversifies the language of humans to prevent them from committing as great a sin as the one they have committed at Babel.

Language diversification, then, does not seem to necessarily be a bad thing. Further emphasizing this perspective is the relationship between this text and the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. There, God says to Abraham “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3) God’s purpose and direction in human history is still focused on all the “families” of the earth. “Families” is often translated “peoples” as in the NIV to emphasize the cultural aspects of the statement. In that sense, the account of Babel is a backdrop to

²³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*, 326.

God's call of Abraham, and perhaps even the primary purpose of the account. God's plan is not to punish the various cultures he creates at Babel, but to bless them. In the context of Babel, the diversification of language serves to protect humanity from the depths of their own sin while God is enacting his plan to redeem and bless his them. Language diversification also causes the people to begin filling the earth as God had intended. It leads to them more fully expressing the purpose for which he had created them by taking dominion over all of creation. The obstacle to them working together becomes the opportunity for them to achieve God's will and bring him glory.

The Language of Other Nations

Throughout Israel's history in the Old Testament, the language is used to describe the other nations. These passages often express the differences between Israel and the other nations, but also express the vastness of God's control. A brief examination of them will help in understanding the role language has played as it relates to the culture of Israel and the nations.

In Deuteronomy 28:49, as the curses for disobedience are given, one of them warns of God sending a nation to conquer the Israelites. This nation is described as coming "from far away" and as speaking a "language you do not understand." In this passage, language, specifically the diversity of it, is used to express just how foreign this nation will be to Israel. The phrase is a bit of hyperbole, as the nation is also described as coming "from the end of the earth" in the same sentence. The strangeness of other languages is used to express just how much Israel does not know, and at the same time how God controls the course of nations and people the Israelites haven't even heard of yet. This curse is fulfilled in Jeremiah 5:15, where the same phrase is used to describe the nation God is bringing against Jerusalem as "a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say."

In Nehemiah 13:24, language is used to illustrate how the nation of Judah had lost its own culture. In the context of Nehemiah dealing with the Jews that had married women of other nations, he bemoans that fact that half of their children "could not speak the language of Judah" because of this.

The drifting away from their native language was an indication how they had drifted away from their identity as God's people.

In the third chapter of Ezekiel, the obstacle of language in communication is used to highlight Israel's stubbornness in refusing to listen to the prophets. God contrasts the people of Israel with "people of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand." (Ezekiel 3:6) The contrast is that, despite the barrier, the people of such a foreign language would have been more likely to listen to Ezekiel than the people of Israel.

In Daniel, the word "languages" is used to represent the scope of the reign of the kings of Babylon. It is used as part of the phrase "people, nations and languages" to describe all full number of the people on earth, by the different cultural divisions. Daniel also mentions it in his vision of the Son of Man. In the vision, "peoples, nations, and languages" is used to describe the full scope of the Son of Man's dominion over the earth, namely that his kingdom would encompass the full scope of mankind.

Jesus as the Word Incarnate

As mentioned already, John opens his gospel with the idea, or person, of "the Word." John proceeds to explain the nature of the Word. We learn that, among other things, it was in the beginning, it was with God, it was God, that all things were made through the Word, and that in the Word was life. John then proceeds to associate the Word with the person of Jesus, describing it as "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14) John is the only Biblical author to use the term "Word" so directly as a name for the second person of the trinity, employing it in the first chapter of the gospel that bears his name as well as I John 1:1 and Revelation 19:13.

"Word" in this passage is the Greek term *λογος*. Many possibilities have been suggested as to the exact meaning and source for John's use of the term. Many Greek schools of philosophy used the term, often in the context of reason or order. The Stoics used it as a term for the divine rational principle

of all that exists. Philo adopted the term into Jewish thought as denoting the ideal. Gnosticism also used the term in association with the divine wisdom, sometimes expressing the two as a pair.

The strongest background for John's usage is the Old Testament. There, "the word" is used about the activity of God, specifically in creation, revelation, and deliverance. "The word" is used to explain how revelation comes to the prophets, as in Isaiah 38:4 "Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah." Bruce²⁴ and others compare this usage with other instances such as Isaiah 7:3's "the Lord said to Isaiah." The phrasing of Isaiah 38:4 renders the word itself the subject and personifies the word. Bruce goes as far as to see it as a messenger.

God's "word" is also described as sufficient for accomplishing tasks in Isaiah 55:11:

so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

In Psalm 107:20, God's "word" is said to be the source of healing and deliverance. In all these instances, there is a subtle personification of God's "word." This personification is even more prevalent in non-Biblical Jewish writing during the intertestamental period.²⁵ Carson suggests that John, using the background of the Old Testament, chose the term *logos* because it had such a broad background and therefore could be shaped for a unique Christian usage.²⁶

A "word" is an expression of inner thought, as well as the revelation of that inner thought to others. That idea seems to be in John's mind when he uses the term to apply to Jesus and specifically the incarnation. Jesus is the revelation of God to humans. Much can be said about the implications of Jesus as "the Word" and we can note a few.

²⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, paperback ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 30.

²⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 115.

²⁶ Carson,, 116.

First, John ties this picture of “the Word” to Jesus’ role as the one who reveals God’s glory to us. Silva calls him “the Revealer of divine glory.”²⁷ In this role, he makes God the father known to humans (verse 18). The glory John talks about is said to be “full of grace and truth.” Truth is an idea strongly associated with language and communication. We often talk about whether a statement someone made is true or not. As perfect communication, Jesus himself communicates only truth. He cannot be a false Word, because of God’s very nature. Jesus himself is, in some sense, the very message of God. The Father’s communication is “the Word,” the person of Jesus.

Second, it is impossible to escape the fact that our words seem to find their source in the Divine Word. The relationship between humankind being made “in the image of God” and language has already been touched on above, but the point is just as strongly realized here. This idea will be explored in more detail later, but for now we can note that the relationship is present. God’s very nature is fundamental to the existence of language.

Third, the creational role of God’s word is again emphasized here. John speaks of the Word as the means by which all things were made. Creation occurs “through” the Word, calling to mind the picture of Genesis. Other passages in the New Testament draw upon the same idea. Colossians 1:16, for instance, says that “By him all things were made” and “all things were created through him.” The Greek word the ESV renders as “by” in this passage (ἐν) is other times translated as “in” (in the RSV and NIV for example). When used in a logical sense, the meaning is “by means of.” Since Genesis tells us God created the world by means of his word, Colossians is telling us that Jesus is that same Word.

Hebrews also expresses this idea of Christ as the Word.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

²⁷ Silva, 37.

In this passage, we again see the idea that the world was created through the Son, relating the Son to the Word. We also see the Son as the message of God. And the sustaining nature of the Son is also related to the concept of “word,” namely the “word of his power.” We also see God’s embracing of language as how to communicate the message of the Gospel, both in the imagery of the message and the mode of the message. God speaks. He speaks to us by his Son (the Word).

The Redemption of Language at Pentecost

The gift of tongues to the apostles at Pentecost stands as a major change for the history of human language. Along with Babel, Pentecost is likely to be the story that comes to mind about language in the Bible. The two accounts have many parallels which relate to each other, and this relationship is often the backdrop for understanding the gift of tongues at Pentecost.

First, both accounts clearly deal with languages, and particularly God’s intervention into the nature of languages. While in Babel God’s intervention results in the confusion of people through the creation of multiple languages, in Acts God’s intervention results in the understanding of people despite multiple languages. This relationship can also be noted from the text itself. The Greek for “tongues” in Acts 2 is from the root $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha$. The same Greek word is used in the Septuagint for “tongues” in Genesis 11:7.

Second, both similar commands immediately precede both accounts. Prior to Babel, God has instructed Noah to fill the earth. In Acts 1, Jesus, just before his ascension, instructs his disciples that they shall be his witnesses “to the end of the earth.” Indeed, parallels are often drawn between the cultural mandate of Genesis and the Great Commission of Jesus. And in both the accounts of Babel and Pentecost, these instructions are recorded just prior to God’s intervention into human languages. Genesis 9:7 restates Genesis 1:28, while Acts 1 is Luke’s second account of Jesus’ instruction, having already recorded them in Luke 24:47.

Third, in both cases people are gathering together. In Genesis 11 the people had gathered together in disobedience in the city of Babel, while in Acts they have gathered together in obedience to Jesus' command to not depart from the city of Jerusalem. The fact that both places are cities further highlights the contrast of the parallel. The narrative has shifted from the idea of a city being contrary to God's will to a city that is the place where the disciples wait for God's will. And in both cases, God sends people out from the city.

Fourth, in both accounts God comes from heaven to intervene. In Genesis 11, God comes down to see the tower and to confuse the tongues of the people. But in Acts 2 the Holy Spirit comes from heaven as tongues of fire. While at Babel the purpose was to confound humans via multiple languages, at Pentecost the purpose is to provide understanding to humans across multiple languages. Again, in this parallel we see a contrast. Tongues for confusion becomes tongues for understanding. The confusion at Pentecost is over how such a thing can happen, as evidenced by the crowd's statement: "And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ... And all were amazed and perplexed." (Acts 2:7-8, 12)

Fifth, while Babel results in people being unable to understand each other, Pentecost results in the opposite for the people present. After Babel, they could not "hear" one another, while after Pentecost they could hear one another in a new way. Both deal with the ability to hear, but what happens at Pentecost seemingly undoes what God did at Babel. And it is perhaps for this reason that many have viewed Pentecost as the reversal of Babel. John Stott, for example, states the following, noting many of the points outlined above:

Ever since the early church fathers, commentators have seen the blessing of Pentecost as a deliberate and dramatic reversal of the curse of Babel. At Babel human languages were confused and the nations were scattered; in Jerusalem the language barrier was supernaturally overcome as a sign that the nations would now be gathered together in Christ, prefiguring the great day when the redeemed company will be drawn 'from every nation, tribe, people, and

language'. Besides, at Babel earth proudly tried to ascend to heaven, whereas in Jerusalem heaven humbly descended to earth.²⁸

I suggest it is more accurate to view Pentecost as a redemption of Babel than a reversal of it. To reverse what was done at Babel, God would have had to return humans to a single language again. That is not what he does. Instead, he takes the various languages humans are speaking creates unity in from them. He does not undo all the implications of each language; its culture and worldview. But from them he does create a way for the gospel to be shared across those barriers of those languages. That is what makes it a redemption as opposed to a reversal. He takes the human language as it exists, with all the effects and ramifications of what happened at Babel, and uses it in that form to spread the gospel to the nations.

For the purposes of this paper, this notion gives us perhaps the greatest insight into the topic. The reaction of the people present is astonishment at hearing the Gospel in their own native language. God himself does not see languages purely as barrier to the advancement of his kingdom. Rather, he uses them as an opportunity to impress upon the hearers of the message the greatness it contains. Even without the miraculous intervention seen at Pentecost, language continues to present the same opportunity today.

It is important here to address the question of exactly what the nature of the gift of tongues comprised. The question of whether the gift of tongues at Pentecost, and elsewhere in the Bible, were the words of existing human languages has been one of much debate. Of importance is determining the relationship between the gift of tongues seen at Pentecost and the gift as mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. Scholars have suggested many possible understandings of the nature of the gift of tongues. Some have suggested that, since the tongues in Acts 2 were intelligible to the audience present, all gifts of tongues are the miraculous speaking of a foreign language. Others, emphasizing the statement of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 that no one understands someone speaking in tongues, hold that

²⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 2nd ed. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press: 1990), 68.

all gifts of tongues are unintelligible babbling. Still others have concluded that the gifts of Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 are different in nature, and that while the tongues in Acts 2 were miraculous foreign language speech, the tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 are unintelligible. The defense of the nature of the gift of tongues can be strong. As an example, see Stott's defense of the position that the tongues at Pentecost were foreign languages:

It was not a case of incoherent utterance. Liberal commentators, who begin with a prejudice against miracles, suggest that the 120 believers broke into unintelligible, ecstatic speech, and that Luke (who had visited Corinth with Paul) mistakenly supposed that it was literal languages. Thus Luke got in a muddle and confused two different things... Those of us who have confidence in Luke as a reliable historian, however, let alone as an inspired contributor to the New Testament, conclude that it is not he who is mistaken, but rather his rationalistic interpreters.²⁹

In examining Pentecost, one suggestion that is sometimes made is that the miraculous element was in the hearing of the words, not the speaking of them. This would seem to mean that the same speech by one person was able to be understood in the different languages of the audience. At first blush, the text might seem to support such an interpretation. Luke seems to describe the event this way in verse 6 when he states, "each one was hearing them speak in his own language." And verse 8 quotes the audience as asking, "And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?" But Luke is clear that the actual speech of the of those present was where the phenomenon rested. Verse 4 tells us that they "began to speak in other tongues." This clearly means that the speech itself was changed, not that a miracle was worked among the audience.

Charles R. Smith examines this issue in detail. He suggests that the best interpretation of the text is to understand Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 as describing the same phenomenon, and that the nature of tongues is that they are unintelligible speaking (though he does leave open the possibility that Acts 2 is unique). In his summary of his opinion, he writes:

²⁹ Stott, 66.

New Testament tongues should be understood as a nonmiraculous expression of devotion resulting from the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer...

In all cases where tongues are not merely pretended, both Biblical and modern, they involve an unintelligible extemporaneous speech which, though in some ways phonologically similar to language, is syntactically meaningless. There are occasional reports of foreign language elements being included in these otherwise unintelligible speeches. When authentic, these may point to an exaltation of memory. It is possible that foreign words, phrases, or sentences, forgotten on the conscious level, may be recalled from the subconscious level during this experience. This might be expected only in cases of trance, ecstasy, or unusual excitement. This may have been the case at Pentecost, or the tongues on that occasion may have been uniquely miraculous.³⁰

In analyzing the event of Pentecost, Smith gives importance to the statement of some of those present recorded in verse 13: But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine." Peter's speech reinforces the same idea when he says, "For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day." Smith's main point is that no one who was shocked to hear someone unexpectedly speaking their own language would conclude that what was happening was attributable to drunkenness. It is partially from this that he concludes the speaking in Acts 2 was largely unintelligible but contained some words or phrases that either were or sounded like words from real languages. He writes:

All the evidence suggests that Biblical tongues were in all cases ecstatic utterances and essentially unintelligible. Any such utterances (today as well) may occasionally have included foreign words or phrases, but these were only bits and pieces in the mass of unrecognizable sounds.³¹

Later Smith explains how people can subconsciously remember things in other languages, even when they do not understand those languages.³² He suggests this psychological phenomenon as a way of explaining what is happening at Pentecost.³³ There are a few issues with such an understanding.

³⁰ Charles R. Smith, *Tongues in Biblical Perspective* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1972), 130.

³¹ Smith, 40.

³² Smith, 113-123.

³³ It should be noted that Smith in no way can be accused of the liberalism Stott mentions. He fully believes the gift of tongues to be a spiritual gift and one that comes by the work of the Holy Spirit, even when discussing psychological explanations for the nature of it. His discussion on the topic is focused on why the audience at Pentecost would have heard their native language if the gift of tongues is always unintelligible. He himself says "Though a Christian should insist that the tongues at Pentecost were directly *caused* by the Holy Spirit,

First, the list of populations present at Pentecost includes at least 15 distinct geographic regions, and implies that they each represent a different language that is heard by the audience. It seems unlikely that such a diverse group of languages would be accounted for as something subconsciously remembered. It would be amazingly coincidental that the believers who began to speak in tongues all just happened to have heard words in phrases in those languages. That in and of itself would almost render the event miraculous.

Second, Smith sees the group identified in verse 5 (“Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven.”) as the same group identified in verse 13 (“But others mocking said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’”). I suggest that these were two different groups. Luke’s statements about the group in verse 5 indicate that none of them would have charged the believers with drunkenness. He uses words such as “each” (verse 6 and 8) and “all” (verse 12) when discussing them hearing their own language and their amazement over the phenomenon. He also describes the group in verse 13 as “others” in contrast to this astonished multitude. It would seem then that there were two groups present. The first heard the believers speaking in their native languages and were astounded by it. The second heard words that they could not understand and thought them to be drunkards. This second group could have been comprised of people who did not speak any of the languages Luke mentions. It is possible they spoke only Aramaic and Greek, and thus would not require a miracle to hear the believers speak in their native language. If so, hearing a bunch of people make very diverse sounds that they did not understand, it might have been reasonable for them to make a charge of drunkenness.

It seems best to conclude that the event of Pentecost is the miraculous speech of actual foreign languages. This raises the question of how to then reconcile Pentecost with the other instances where

without detracting from this fact, the words in the various foreign languages may *possibly* be explained in just such a fashion.” p 116. Smith’s attempt is rooted in trying to reconcile Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 as being the same nature.

the gift of tongues is discussed in the New Testament, and particularly 1 Corinthians 14. Stott points out that the details of the nature of speaking in tongues are described and explained only in Acts 2. While other passages, such as 1 Corinthians 14 mention speaking in tongues, they do not provide examples of what it constituted.³⁴ We can either than interpret such passages as 1 Corinthians 14 in light of our understanding of details of Acts 2, or we can understand them as two related but different phenomenon, a possibility even Smith seems open to accepting.

The Full Picture of Redeemed Mankind

Finally, the picture scripture gives of the redeemed people of God holds some significant insight into the Biblical perspective of language. As already noted, immediately after the events of Babel the Bible records God’s call of Abram and the fact that he intends to bless the whole (newly multi-language) world through Abram. We find this same multi-language picture of mankind in the apocalyptic texts of the Bible. There, language is one of the delineating factors to signify the fullness of mankind.

In Daniel’s vision of the son of man, language is expressed alongside peoples and nations as a term to encapsulated the entirety of humanity.

I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

The kingdom being described here is being described with both “spatial” and “temporal” boundaries. In temporal terms, the kingdom is described as “everlasting,” “shall not pass away,” and

³⁴ Stott, 67-68.

“shall not be destroyed.” Clearly, the temporally boundary of the kingdom is limitless. There shall be no point in time that it does not cover. Likewise, spatially it is described as encompassing all “peoples,” “nations”, and “languages.” The same notion is being described. There is not a part of the whole of humans that will not belong to the kingdom, no matter which way humans are divided into groups. Whether the boundaries are racial, national, or linguistic (nor any other method) all of humanity will be brought together under this kingdom.

The passage also highlights an opportunity. These facets of humanity are brought together to serve the son of man. It seems that they do this, while part of one kingdom, with these distinguishing factors still intact. Somehow, these differences don’t hinder the members of the kingdom from serving. If anything, they may be the only glimpse of how service might differ from one person to the next, defined by their cultural (including language) distinction.

This same idea seems to be present in the other major end times picture, Revelation. There, language is again one of the key terms to highlight the full breadth and scope of humanity, along with “peoples” and “nations” (and “tribes” as well). Seven times the term “language” is used as part of signifying the fullness of humanity: 5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 13:7, 14:6, and 17:15. Language is clearly one of the key ways God categorizes people in the world. While all the passages use the term to signify the completeness of mankind, the passages in chapters 5, 7 and 14 focus on the redeemed people of God. Their intent is to show that people God has redeemed come from all parts of humans, not just a specific group. Chapter 5 is the song of the foul living creatures and the twenty-four elders sung to the Lamb, and is like the passage from Daniel:

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:9-10)

This text seems to describe how the Lamb, like Daniel's "son of man" can bring together the diverse group of humanity and equip them for service in his kingdom, by ransoming them with his blood. And this diverse group is made into one kingdom, but they do not seem to lose their distinguishing features. That is a point of emphasis in chapter 7's text:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10)

Perhaps the most startling thing is that John describes these people from "all languages" crying out in a single loud voice, as if the multiple languages can unite in an understandable chorus. He can see and hear their distinguishing features, but at the same time understand their unity in their expression. The great multitude that John sees is made more impressive because of their differences. This is the culmination of the redemption of language, because it is the culmination of the redemption of God's people. And now those diverse languages can unite together as one in the praise of Christ.

Passages such as this reveal the nature of language in serving as a defining characteristic of a distinct culture or people group. God's heart for the diversity of mankind and his goal of salvation being extended to all the nations (i.e. people groups) includes a recognition of the importance of the languages of those people groups.

Summary

Clearly, God has placed an important emphasis on language. This is evident from his use of it in creation, his gift of it to mankind as part of his image, his recognition of the power of it at Babel and Pentecost, and the importance it plays in the global nature of God's plan of salvation should impress upon us the significance of language. It is a large part of what makes us uniquely human, and perhaps one of the most tangible ways we experience what it means to be made in God's image. It is also a large

part of what makes each of our cultures uniquely different. And it is how the gospel goes forth into the world.

CHAPTER 3

A HISTORY OF LANGUAGE, TRANSLATION, AND CHRISTIANITY

The church has taken different approaches to language at different times in history. At sometimes new languages have been embraced, while at other times they have been avoided, neglected, or even viewed as dangerous to the gospel. Some of this history is evident from the history of the translation of the scriptures into new languages as the church spread. Given the background of those present at Pentecost, the early church had among its numbers many speakers of many languages. Early Christians included some who spoke Syriac. As the church spread outside the bounds of the Roman empire in the first few centuries, it moved into locations that were less Hellenistic and therefore began to rely less on the koine Greek language.

The spread of Christianity had a critical interaction with the languages of the world. Latourette notes the impact:

It must be apparent that the linguistic influence of Christianity had effects even beyond the raising of various languages to the dignity of literary tongues and the creation of literatures in them. The spread of Greek in Asia Minor assisted in the creation of that Byzantine state and culture which in the East arose out of the Roman Empire. The extension of Latin in Gaul and in other parts of Occidental Europe was one of the causes of that sense of unity which underneath all differences and dissension characterized Western Christendom in the Middle Ages. In Armenia, Georgia, and Egypt the influence of Christianity upon language and literature augmented what would now be termed nationalism. Perhaps it helped to separate the Goths from their Roman subjects.³⁵

The Septuagint

Even prior to the events of the New Testament, the background of the Christian church shows that there was a desire to communicate the message of the faith into other languages. Some of the best evidence for this can be seen in the Septuagint. The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew texts, many of which later became part of the Old Testament. With the spread of the Jewish faith across

³⁵ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: Volume 1 The First Five Centuries* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1937), 258.

the Roman empire in the centuries prior to the birth of Jesus, many Jews did not speak Hebrew. This was particularly true in Jewish communities in Egypt, largely based around Alexandria.

The term Septuagint itself can be confusing, as it has slightly different meanings. It can refer to the entirety of ancient Greek translations of the Hebrew scriptures or a particular printed edition of the ancient Greek text. In the field of textual criticism, it more precisely refers to the oldest Greek translation, often specifically the Greek translation of the Pentateuch only. The term “Septuagint” itself is a mid-second century phrase, used almost exclusively by Christians.³⁶ For the purposes here, I use it to mean the broad scope of ancient Greek manuscripts and translations.

During the Ptolemaic era, waves of Jewish immigrants settled in the area around Alexandria. Josephus claims that after Ptolemy conquered Judea, he took up to 12,000 captives with him back to Egypt. Others were sure simply attracted to the social and economic conditions of Egypt at the time. Since Judea was part of the Ptolemaic empire until 198 BC, Jewish settlement into Egypt was rather common. It was this community that undertook the translation of Hebrew texts. The work began in the 3rd century B.C., with large portions of it being undertaken in Alexandria. The law (the first five books of Moses) would have been completed first due the importance on the reading of the law in worship in the synagogue. The entirety of the Greek translation was complete by the year 132 B.C. The earliest copies in existence today were produced by Christians, who adopted the text.

From Alexandria, the use of this Greek translation spread to other Greek speaking Jewish communities. Acts attests that there were Greek speaking Jews even in the Jerusalem (referred to as Hellenists) who would have surely been familiar with the Septuagint. The early Christian church adopted the translation and its use was prevalent among early Christian writers. Philo of Alexandria seems to have only known the scriptures in their Greek translation. Josephus as well depended largely on the Septuagint in his Antiquities.

³⁶ Karen H. Jobes and Moises Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2015), 23.

The Septuagint text was common by Jesus' day. While in the synagogues in Judea during Jesus' ministry would have largely based their worship around the Hebrew texts, the Greek translation would have been common among some of the synagogue members as well. One such example can be seen in the account of Stephen in the book of Acts. Acts 6 relates that setting for Stephen's debate was "the Synagogue of the Freeman" and included Cyrenians and Alexandrians. These terms signify a Hellenist population. Indeed, Stephen himself seems to have been a Hellenist, give his name and the context of the complaint by which he was chosen to serve in the distribution of food. Stephen's Greek familiarity is evident in his speech. His quotations and allusions to the Old Testament are most consistent with the Septuagint.³⁷

Other New Testament authors relied on the Septuagint as well. Given that the text of the New Testament itself was Greek, the Septuagint provided an easy translation to incorporate for the writers. The influence of the Septuagint on the New Testament would be hard to understate. Metzger notes:

It was the Bible of the early Christian church, and when the Bible is quoted in the New Testament, it is almost always from the Septuagint version. Furthermore, even when not directly quoted in the New Testament, many of the terms used and partly created by the Septuagint translators became part and parcel of the language of the New Testament.³⁸

As the first century AD closed, Jews began to utilize the Septuagint less, while the Christian church continued to embrace. The wide usage of the Septuagint by the church may have discouraged Jews from using a translation utilized by a rival religion. Eventually, Talmudic scholars condemned the entire idea of the Septuagint, going as far as to appoint a fast day to mark the tragic event.³⁹ Greek speaking Jews began to rely on other Greek versions, such as the Aquila translation. Over time, various copies of the text began to differ from one another, leading Origen to undertake an effort to restore the original version through his work known as the Hexapla.

³⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 49.

³⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Version* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 18.

³⁹ Metzger, 20.

It is clear that there were many Greek translation traditions for the text of the Hebrew Bible. One of the Dead Sea manuscripts is a Greek translation of the Minor Prophets, from the fifth century A.D. at the latest. Jobes and Silva write, “This find provides clear evidence that prior to the second-century debates among Jews and Christians, more than one Greek version of the Bible was in circulation.”⁴⁰

The Septuagint’s influence continues even to this day. It has influenced many other translations, such as Coptic, Latin, Gothic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Syriac, and Slavonic. It even remains the official authoritative text of the Old Testament for the modern Greek Orthodox Church. In most parts of the Roman empire during early Christianity, the church population was largely Greek-speaking. It was also predominately a religion found in cities as opposed to smaller towns and villages. Latourette notes it was particularly common in coastal areas as well.⁴¹

Ancient Translations

In the first few centuries of the church, more than a dozen translations of scriptures emerged from locations in Asia, Europe, and Africa. The two most influential were the Syriac and Latin translations. These translations were both widely used on their own and formed the basis for many subsequent translations.

Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic. Related to Hebrew, but using a different script called Estrangela. The spread of Christianity into the region is attested in Acts 11. After the persecution following the stoning of Stephen, we are told that members of the church spread out, with some traveling to Antioch in Syria. Luke notes in the account that while others took the approach of speaking about Christ only with Jews, in Antioch preaching began to Hellenists as well. It was in Antioch that the disciples are first referred to by the term “Christians.”

⁴⁰ Jobes and Silva, 26.

⁴¹ Latourette, *The First Five Centuries*, 87.

Antioch was an important center for the spread of Christianity, especially among Greek speaking populations. At some early point, the city of Edessa became a center for Syrian speaking Christians. The exact date of introduction of Christianity into Edessa is not known, but evidence suggests it was by the early second century. As the faith spread to more regions of Syria, the need for a translation of the New Testament into Syriac resulted in what eventually became known as the Old Syriac version. Two manuscripts, containing portions of the Gospels, are extant today. Portions of Acts and the Pauline Epistles exist in quotations and references by early church fathers.

Older still is the translation known as the Diatessaron, which survives today in only secondary witnesses of the text. It was a harmony of the four gospels compiled by Tatian, a pupil of Justin Martyr. Published in both Greek and Syriac (though it is unclear which came first) it was in wide circulation for many centuries in Middle East.

It seems apparent that the church in Syria viewed language as an opportunity. It embraced the chance to move the Christian faith into new communities by the access a new language granted. By the late second or early third century, portions of the New Testament in Old Syriac were circulating in Syria.⁴² From this early location, the faith spread to as far as Central Asia and China, outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire. Latourette sums it up this way:

Here, then, in a region outside the Roman Empire and only partially under Hellenistic influence, was a wide early extension of the Christian faith. Usually the Christian communities were small. Even in the capital, Seleucia-Odesiphon, the Christians were few and probably did not have a bishop until about A.D. 280. Yet this minority was reaching out, often with missionary zeal, and was augmenting its numbers.⁴³

The importance Christianity played in impacting the Syriac language was immense. Latourette argues that Christian writing was the reason that Syriac literature rose to a level of significance, stating

⁴² Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 26.

⁴³ Latourette, *The First Five Centuries*, 104.

that its progress had largely been stopped by Hellenization and the prominence of Greek, but that the necessity of reaching Syriac speakers resulted in a flourishing of literary activity in the language.⁴⁴

The Old Syriac manuscripts were eventually compiled into what is called the Peshitta. Completed in the fourth or fifth centuries, the Peshitta combined the various sources into one text. Even then, there is variety among the manuscripts with regards to the order of books. Metzger notes the “diversity of translators” is obvious in the range of style and quality of the work.⁴⁵

The Latin versions of the Bible are perhaps the most influential translation of scripture. It impacted the development of the Romance languages, particularly Jerome’s vulgate. Despite its association in the public consciousness with Rome, the earliest Latin translations likely originated in Africa. Rome was a Greek speaking city until the third century. By the late second century and early third century, Latin translations of the New Testament appear in Christian writings. By the fourth century, there was a wide variety of Latin translations circulating. These texts ultimately trace to three families: the African text from Cyprian, the European text from Irenaeus, and the Italian text from Augustine. The variety of translation between the text was great enough that in 383, Pope Damasus commissioned Jerome to produce a standardized translation. Within a year, Jerome had finished his translation of the Gospels. Over the next years, he (perhaps with some help from others) would revise and standardize the Old and New Testament. He made three translations of the Psalter, the first two by comparing the Old Latin to the Septuagint and the final (though not widely used) version from Hebrew.

In his preface to the four gospels, addressed to Pope Damasus, Jerome explains the reason for his motivation. He writes, “...readings at variance with the early copies cannot be right. For if we are to pin our faith to the Latin texts, it is for our opponents to tell us *which*; for there are almost as many forms of texts as there are copies.”⁴⁶ Jerome’s concern was that such a wide variety of translations had

⁴⁴ Latourette, *The First Five Centuries*, 257.

⁴⁵ Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 27.

⁴⁶ Jerome, *Preface to the Four Gospels*.

appeared and their divergence from the original. The need for accuracy with respect to the original was important as the basis of faith. As for his style, Jerome had translated many works besides the scriptures. In a letter to Pammachius, he explains that his method of translation is typically “sense for sense” but that he holds the scriptures in special regard and so instead utilizes a more “word for word” approach. He writes, “For I myself not only admit but freely proclaim that in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the holy scriptures where even the order of the words is a mystery) I render sense for sense and not word for word.”⁴⁷ Despite this, Jerome’s translation is largely much more readable than those that came before him. Metzger writes, “The pre-Jerome translations in general lack polish and are often painfully literal.”⁴⁸ Jerome placed a greater emphasis on the portions of the Old Testament that were part of the Hebrew canon. His less thorough attention to the non-canonical books is evident in the short time he spent on them. Some of them he made no revisions to at all.⁴⁹

Jerome’s work was not without opposition. Augustine related how one congregation shouted at the reader of Jonah over the text stating Jonah took shelter under “ivy” instead of a “gourd.” But despite any opposition, Jerome’s Vulgate eventually was widely accepted in Western Europe, becoming the standard version of the Bible. It also served as the basis in the fourteenth century for Wycliffe’s English translation as well as into the languages of German, Italian, French, and others.

As the Roman Empire became officially Christian, the missionary efforts of the church often overlapped with the political expansion of the empire. As Barbarian tribes integrated into society, they also integrated into the culture, religion, and language of Rome. Latourette notes:

Since this culture and Christianity were now wedded, in adopting the one they professed the other. Christian missionaries were apostles not only of religion, but of the Greek or Latin language. As so frequently in the spread of a religion, conversion was part of the process of acculturation.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Jerome, *Letter LVII To Pammachius on the Best Method of Translating*.

⁴⁸ Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 31.

⁴⁹ Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 34.

⁵⁰ Latourette, *The First Five Centuries*, 211.

The close association of the Christian faith with the Roman Empire after Constantine resulted in a mixing of the political and religious spread. In Gaul the spread of Christianity apparently brought about the end of the Celtic language, as those giving up the Celtic faith also gave up the Celtic dialect, adopting Latin.⁵¹

But the Latin translation, despite its origins as a vernacular work, also has a history in the view of language as obstacle to the faith. Long after Latin ceased to be the vernacular language of the people, the Western church relied on the Latin text. In many locations throughout the middle ages of Western Christianity, only small portions of the Bible were available in a language other than Latin. The reading of Scripture and the service of the church would be performed in Latin, even if those in attendance were unable to understand the language.

The Coptic translation of the scriptures provides another example of the influence of Christianity on languages, as it resulted in an entirely new alphabet. Christianity seems to have first entered Egypt in Alexandria. While it thrived, producing famous church fathers such as Clement and Origen, it was predominately Greek oriented.⁵² This was because Hellenization had been the practice during the Ptolemaic period and only increased under Roman rule. Greek became the language of the upper class and the hieroglyphic scripts were less commonly used. Egyptian language largely became the language of the lower class, concentrated in Upper Egypt. But by third century the faith had spread out into other parts of Egypt and non-Greek churches were started. The language of Egypt was Coptic, a derivative of the Ancient Egyptian language. Prior to the expansion of the church, Coptic was written in hieroglyphs. As Christianity spread in Egypt, its members adopted twenty-four Greek letters to use with seven Egyptian characters to create a new alphabet for the Coptic language.

Multiple dialects of Coptic ultimately developed, the diversity owing largely to the geography of Egypt. The most influential was Sahidic, the dialect of Upper Egypt. Translations of both the New and

⁵¹ Latourette, *The First Five Centuries*, 202.

⁵² Latourette, *The First Five Centuries*, 91.

Old Testament were made, with the latter seemingly based of the Septuagint. Bohairic is the latest dialect to develop, and the most thoroughly attested. It is the only Coptic version of the Bible that is complete and attested to in multiple manuscripts. A strong relationship between Coptic and the Old Latin versions also seems to exist, which is not surprising given the Old Latin's importance in Africa. It is widely agreed that because there was likely few converts to Judaism, that would have led to a need for a Coptic translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the Coptic Old Testament used by the church would largely have been based on the Septuagint.⁵³

The Gothic language, like Coptic, owes a significant portion of its development to Christianity. The missionary Ulfilas, himself a Goth, became a bishop in 341. He lived the rest of his life among the West Goths (also known as the Visigoths). As part of his missionary efforts, he developed a new alphabet for the language, which is today known as Moeso-Gothic. He used Greek and Latin characters, along with a few older Gothic runes as the basis for his alphabet. With it he translated nearly all the Bible, excluding only the books of Samuel and Kings. Only portions of the text he created survive. Very small portions of Genesis 5 and Psalm 52, along with the fifth and seventh chapters of Nehemiah are the only portions of the Old Testament. About half of the Gospels and some parts of the Pauline epistles exist as well, with 2 Corinthians being the only complete book. Ulfilas' work is among the very first examples of missionaries developing an alphabet for a language for the specific purpose of being able to create a translation of the Bible. Despite the widespread rule of the Goths across Europe, very little remains of writing in the Gothic language. Metzger notes only a few verses of Genesis and the Psalms, and portions of Nehemiah chapters 5 through 7 for the Old Testament; while in the new testament just under half of the text of the Gospels, and portions of all the Pauline Epistles, with only 2 Corinthians being complete.⁵⁴

⁵³ Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 36.

⁵⁴ Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 39.

Much like Coptic and Gothic, the introduction of Christianity into Armenia had an impact on the language's alphabet. The Christian faith entered Armenia by the third century. Missionary efforts flourished under the work of Gregory the Illuminator. Himself a member of the royal family, one of his converts was the king of Armenia, Tiridates III. Upon his conversion, the king decreed Christianity to be the official religion of the state. At the time, the Armenian language had no alphabet. Any written materials were in Greek and Syriac, and would have been translated orally into Armenian as necessary. Again, spurred by the desire to put the scriptures into the local language, an early attempt at an alphabet was made by a bishop by the name of Daniel. But the alphabet he created (which was likely patterned after the Aramaic alphabet) was generally found to be unsuitable for Armenian, due to the complex sounds of Armenian.⁵⁵ A second, and successful, attempt was made by Mesrop Mashtots around the year 405 AD. Mesrop was the friend and helper of Sahak, the primate of the Armenian church and a descendant of Gregory the Illuminator.

Mesrop was a monk, living for a few years in a monastery and practicing a life of austerity. In 387 AD Armenia lost its independence and was split up among Persia and the Byzantine empire. Persian Armenia was the larger, and an Armenian king ruled as a vassal of Persia. The effect of this was to stir up a desire for a stronger national identity. Mesrop, by this time, had become a missionary in 394 A.D. and was preaching in Goghthn. The lack of an alphabet to aid converts in studying scripture frustrated him. The copies of the scriptures they had access to were largely in Syriac and could not be read by most converts. Thus, translators were required to orally translate any scripture. With the support of Sahak and King Vramshapuh, he resolved to create an alphabet for the Armenian language. With the help of a calligrapher by the name of Rufanos of Samosata and perhaps with the council of Daniel, he produced an alphabet of 36 characters in the 405 AD. It was later expanded to 39 letters, in which form it continues today. The alphabet served to encourage the nationalist spirit among Armenians, and is

⁵⁵ Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 41.

created with the development of a strong national identity and the creation of Armenian literature.

Agop Jack Hacikyan describes the importance of the alphabet this way:

Of one thing, however, we can be certain. The creation of the Armenian alphabet was a momentous event, a crucial turning point in the history of the nation the ensured the preservation of the Armenian identity in religious, culture, and literature for centuries to come. It unleashed the spiritual and intellectual potential of an entire people, to the extent that within the very same century a great intellectual revival occurred, giving rise to a literary output that is impressive in both quality and in quantity: the fifth century became the Golden Age of Armenian literature.⁵⁶

With his new alphabet, Mesrop worked quickly to begin translating the Bible. He founded schools throughout Armenia to provide instruction in the alphabet. Sahak himself is said to have produces a translation of the Bible by 411 A.D. using the new alphabet. Mesrop also sent his followers to places such as Edessa, Athens, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Antioch to study and bring back literature, including Greek copies of the scripture translated into Armenian. From these, a second translation was made, completed around 434 A.D.

Armenian manuscripts of the Bible are more prevalent today than any other Ancient version except Latin. Other religious texts, translated into Armenian, provide the best copies of some of the works of the church fathers. The second part of Eusebius's Chronicle is entirely preserved in Armenian, while only a few fragments exist in Greek.

Mesrop may have also played a role in the creation of the Georgian and Caucasian Albanian alphabets. According to Koryun, a historian and author of the biography Life of Mashtots, completed by the middle of the fifth century, Mesrop himself created alphabets for both the Georgian and Caucasian Albanian languages.

Then there came and visited them an elderly man, an Albanian named Benjamin. And he [Mesrop] inquired and examined the barbaric diction of the Albanian language, and then through his usual god-given keenness of mind

⁵⁶ Agop Jack Hacikyan, *The Heritage of Armenian Literature Volume 1: From the Oral Tradition to the Golden Age* (Detroit Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 91.

invented an alphabet, which he, through the grace of Christ, successfully organized and put in order.⁵⁷

Georgian and Caucasian Albanian are indigenous Caucasian languages, unrelated to Indo-European languages like Armenian. The tradition from Koryun is debated by scholars⁵⁸, but it is generally agreed that Mesrop's work had at least an indirect impact in the creation of these two other alphabets, suggesting that perhaps the Armenian alphabet was used as a pattern or source for them.

The Old Church Slavonic version of the Bible follows a similar story as many detailed above. The history of the version begins in Moravia with the missionary efforts of two brothers from Thessalonica; Methodius and Constantine. In Thessalonica, they had been exposed to a Slavic dialect from the large population of Slavs that had emigrated to the city. Constantine had become a priest by the middle of the ninth century, when a Moravian prince named Rastislav requested that the Byzantine emperor Michael III send missionaries to Moravia to instruct the population. Constantine was among those chosen. His brother Methodius accompanied him.

The request for missionaries seems to have been as much political in nature as spiritual. Rastislav had come to power with the support of the Franks. But upon being installed as rule, he began to look for ways to assert independence from the Franks. Great Moravia was already familiar with Christianity when Rastislav sent to Michael for missionaries, and Rastislav states as much in his request. And Rastislav had earlier expelled Roman clergy from the country. By getting missionaries from the Byzantine empire, Rastislav could lessen the influence of the Franks among the clergy in his country.

The two arrived in Great Moravia around 863 A.D. Constantine began work on translating texts into the local language. Finding the Greek and Latin alphabet unsuitable for the sounds of the Slavonic language, Constantine created a new alphabet explicitly for the language, the first script for Slavonic

⁵⁷ Koryun *The Life of Mashtots* XVI.

⁵⁸ Werner Seibt, "The Creation of the Caucasian Alphabets as Phenomenon of Cultural History" (paper presented, Tbilisi, Georgia, 8 September 2011), available from http://www.academia.edu/1355678/Werner_Seibt_The_Creation_of_the_Caucasian_Alphabets_as_Phenomenon_of_Cultural_History; Internet; accessed 5 April 2017.

languages. The script, now known as Glagolitic, was in use for only a brief time. Its decline was due to a struggle for control of the Moravian church.

Methodius and Constantine encountered problems with the Frankish bishops. They had introduced the Byzantine rite and were using the Slavic language for it. The Frankish bishops argued that only Greek, Latin or Hebrew could be used for the liturgy. The argument was eventually settled when the pope gave approval for the use of Slavonic in the service, but under the condition that the scripture was first read in Latin, then in Slavonic.

The brothers eventually traveled to Rome. While there, Constantine became fatally sick. He took monastic vows and change his name to Cyril only shortly before dying in 865 AD. Methodius returned to Great Moravia where he again came into conflict with the Roman clergy. He was imprisoned for a few years before the pope had him released in 872. He died in 885 and his adversaries renewed their efforts against the use of Slavonic language in the worship service. All of Methodius' followers were expelled from the country, ending their efforts in Moravia. But from there they traveled to other Slavic regions. One of Methodius' followers was Clement of Orchid. He'd returned from Rome with Methodius following Constantine's death and was among those expelled from the country after Methodius' death. Together with other students he eventually traveled to Bulgaria. It was during this time that the Cyrillic script was created. It was this script that spread to among the Slavonic languages and was the precursor to the modern Cyrillic alphabet.

The similar event noted in many of these languages is worth noting. Christian missionaries, since the begin of the church, have been responsible for the creation of alphabets and scripts for hundreds of languages. This association of the writing system of languages with the Christian mission continues to be part of the modern missions effort as well, as will be explored shortly. But the roots of it are present in the earliest stages of the church. This practice of creating alphabets enables not only the translation of

the Bible, but also enables other literary cultural expression. As Latourette notes, when discussing the work of Constantine and Methodius:

The achievement was notable, and through the translations prepared by the two brothers and their disciples it was to have lasting consequences for Slavic literature, not only in Central Europe and the Balkans, but also in Russia. Here again is an early instance of a practice which by the twentieth century had made Christian missionaries responsible for having reduced more languages to writing than have been provided with scripts by all other agencies combined.⁵⁹

The other important event from the conversion of the Slavs was the attempt to put the worship service into the local language and the opposition experienced. This would become a pattern and a key factor in the reformation centuries later. Constantine and Methodius' efforts to foster worship in native languages is one of the first of what will be a long pattern that will become very important to the church and its expansion.

The experience among this population of Slavs can be contrasted with the Western Slavs, known to their Germanic neighbors as Wends. Christianity was relatively late and slow to spread among the Wends. In large part, the conversion of the region was due to immigration of Germans as much as it was to the actual conversion of the native population. The undertaking was by and large the work of the Saxons. It was mixed with military conquest as well, resulting in tensions between the conquering Christian nation and the locals.⁶⁰ The results of the efforts were mixed at best. There was reported conversion of many Slavs in the region, but at the same time the tension continued. Latourette writes that "at least the large majority of the clergy were German and were separated from the Slavs by barriers of language and race and by the distrust of a subject population."⁶¹

⁵⁹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: Volume 2 The Thousand Years of Uncertainty* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1938), 161.

⁶⁰ Latourette, *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty*, 180.

⁶¹ Latourette, *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty*, 182.

Missions and Language Prior to the Reformation

The attitudes toward native languages among missionaries of the next few centuries were mixed. There are examples of both attempts to engage cultures in their native language, but also examples of suppression of native language.

Among the Anglo-Saxons, Christianity had spread during the late seventh century. Bede, an English monk, was inclined to encourage his former student, Egbert, who had become the Archbishop of York to teach the population that did not know Latin in their native tongues. Specifically, he suggested have them memorize the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer in their native tongue and states he has often done the same even for uneducated members of the clergy.⁶²

It was common during the middle ages for religious literature to be produced in vernacular languages. But in many places, such as the Anglo-Saxon church, Latin was still the most common language of Scripture. In Scandinavia, priests usually did not speak the same language as their congregation and struggled to translate the Latin text.⁶³

Raymond Lull was one of the most prominent missionaries of his time. Living during the thirteenth century, he had grown up the island of Majorca, which had only been taken from Moorish rule a few years prior to his birth in 1232 AD. After his conversion to Christianity, he felt compelled to be a missionary to Muslims. He championed the study of languages as a tool for missionaries. He urged the Pope to establish schools to prepare missionaries by training them in the language of the people they would be sent to convert. He himself learned Arabic to become a missionary to Muslims. But Lull's methods ultimately did not make set the tone for missions in the Roman Catholic church of the few centuries after his life.

The Roman Catholic churches general insistence on the use of Latin, couple with the political power it came to exercise, resulted in Latin being the language of not just the worship service, but also

⁶² Latourette, *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty*, 350.

⁶³ Latourette, *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty*, 423.

of scholarship. Even in the eastern church, where the use of vernacular tongues in the worship service was more common than in among western church, the role the church played in society contributed to the continuance of Greek.

The Reformation

The Reformation brought about major shifts in the approach to language. Among the protestant reformers, the insistence on the importance of scripture as the only infallible rule of faith necessitated putting that rule into the hands, and language, of the people. Because of this, major efforts to translate the Bible into the vernacular occurred during the period. The translation work of the reformation, from Luther's Bible through the King James Version, is largely based on the *Textus Receptus*. The history of the *Textus Receptus* begins with Erasmus' publication of the Greek New Testament in 1516. The work was published in multiple editions, with adjustments and changes by Erasmus.

John Wycliffe, referred to as the "morning star of the Reformation" for the ideas he professed nearly a century prior to Martin Luther, was not the first to translate the scriptures into English. Evidence of English translations exist as early as the ninth century, often as interlinear translations of the Latin text. But none of these earliest translations was complete. They were often limited to the gospels. And with the Norman conquest in 1066 AD the use of Old English among the educated classes declined, replaced with Norman French. Thus, the Wycliffe Bible became the first complete translation of the Bible into English.

Wycliffe's translation rose from his conviction that Bible alone was the source of authority for doctrine. He questioned the scriptural foundation for papal authority, which brought him into direct conflict with the Roman Catholic church, which eventually charged him as a heretic. Wycliffe's desire was to have scripture in a form where ordinary, everyday people could access and utilize it. Characterizing this belief, Bruce Metzger writes "A strong believer in the Bible as the Word of God addressed to every person, he felt the need to provide the Scriptures in a form that the ordinary reader

could use.”⁶⁴ The Bible that bears his name was not solely his work, but was the result of his leadership. It was published in two versions. The first appeared in 1382 A.D. and was a literal translation of the Latin Vulgate. The second version was produced in 1388 A.D., four years after Wycliffe’s death and was much more readable, following a freer pattern of translation. In creating it, Wycliffe was assisted by Nicholas Hereford, who seems to have taken chief responsibility for the Old Testament, and John Purvey, who was responsible for the 1388 revision. Wycliffe himself seems to have translated the New Testament, or at least the Gospels.

While Wycliffe was not unique in his views on the authority of Scripture, he was unique in expressing his opinion that every man had the right to examine the Bible for himself, believing everyone capable of understanding it, essentially the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture. Wycliffe said, “The New Testament is of full authority, and open to the understanding of simple men, as to the points that be most needful to salvation.” And, he believed that the best way for people to study the scripture was in their native language. His thought was that it was God’s desire to communicate his message to people in their own language so that they could understand it. He says, “it helpeth Christians me to study the Gospel in that tongue in which they know best Christ’s sentence.” It was this conviction that spurred his efforts to put the Bible into the language of the common man. F.F. Bruce notes this conviction:

But before the time of Wycliffe no one seems to have thought of providing ordinary layfolk with a vernacular version of the whole Bible. The provision of such a version, however, was imperative if ordinary layfolk were directly responsible to God as Wycliffe taught, for knowing and obeying his law.⁶⁵

Following his death, Wycliffe was condemned as a heretic in May of 1415 by the Council of Constance. All his writings, including the Bible translation that bore his name, were to be burned. Wycliffe’s body was exhumed and burned as well, with his ashes tossed into the River Swift at Lutterworth. A little more than a century later, the translation efforts of Tyndale and the King James

⁶⁴ Metzger, 57.

⁶⁵ F. F. Bruce, “John Wycliffe and the English Bible,” *Churchman* 98, no. 4 (1984): 297.

translators would supplant the Wycliffe Bible by relying on the Greek and Hebrew texts instead of the Latin. But for the intervening years, the Wycliffe Bible was the lone source of an English translation. Those desiring to read it often met in secret at the risk of punishment to the point of death, but their desire for the Bible in their own language was worth the risk.

Luther's translation of the Bible into German was the first major language event of the reformation itself. Other translations had existed prior, but not one as directly from the original languages as Luther's Bible. Luther started the work while he was forced to remain at Wartburg Castle. To accomplish his goal of creating a language for all the people, he was known to take trips to nearby towns and walk through the market to listen to how people spoke. His New Testament was published in 1522, and the entire Bible in 1534, with the help of many others. Luther continued to work to improve the translations up until his death in 1546. In *An Open Letter on Translating* Luther explained that his desire was to be faithful to the language of the common person. He writes:

We do not have to ask about the literal Latin or how we are to speak German—as these asses do. Rather we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common person in the market about this. We must be guided by their tongue, the manner of their speech, and do our translating accordingly. Then they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.⁶⁶

The effect of Luther's approach had a profound impact on the German language. The German language at the time was composed of many vastly different dialects. The popularity of Luther's translation helped to standardize the language.⁶⁷ And it also influenced William Tyndale in the creation of his English translation.

Tyndale, like Luther, desired a Bible that could be read by the common speaker of the English language, perhaps most famously noted in his response during a dispute with a clergyman. The clergyman had remarked "We were better to be without God's laws than the pope's." Tyndale's reply was "I defy

⁶⁶ Luther, *An Open Letter On Translating*

⁶⁷ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2 ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 35.

the pope, and all his laws;" and added, "If God spared him life, ere many years he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than he did."⁶⁸ He had obtained a Master of Arts in 1515 and received permission to begin a study of theology, but was unhappy that he could not study Scripture itself. His desires for an English translation led to his summons before the Chancellor of the Dioceses of Worcester. Finally, in 1523 Tyndale, just one year after the publication of Luther's New Testament, Tyndale traveled to London to seek the help of Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall in his efforts to produce an English translation, but was refused. A year later, deciding that he could not safely work on his translation in England, he left for Hamburg.

Tyndale completed a translation of the New Testament in 1525 A.D. The first attempt to publish it was interrupted by the authorities. Publication then moved to Worms, a free imperial city, and was completed in 1526. It was smuggled into England and where the crown and the established church conspired to destroy all copies of it. Today only four copies survive. Tyndale himself was tried and convicted of heresy and put to death in 1536. Within four years, four English versions of the Bible were printed, and the King of England had switched from opposing them to supporting them, putting copies of the English Bible in all the churches.

Tyndale's work is often described as one of the most influential pieces of English literature, and it would be hard to overstate the impact it had on the language. Some have declared that his influence on the language was greater than any other person, even Shakespeare. His translation was simple and plain in language and it served as an influence on all English translations since. Tyndale himself can be credited with the creation and popularization of many common phrases, including "moment in time," "the powers that be," "a law unto themselves," "apple of his eye," and "filthy lucre".

Many of Tyndale's idioms found popularity not through his own translation, but through the King James Version of 1611. Estimates, while varying, often state that 80 percent of the King James Bible

⁶⁸ John Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, Chapter XII.

is from Tyndale's translation. David Crystal, in his work on the influence of the King James Bible on the English language, says

Much of the memorable linguistic distinctiveness of the King James Bible in fact originate in Tyndale, whose translation of the New Testament and the first six books of the Old appeared nearly a century before—between 1526 and 1530. But Tyndale's work, considered heretical at the time, had limited impact. It was the King James Bible that made most of this language known.⁶⁹

Also of note is a French translation of the Bible made by Pierre Olivetan. Olivetan was the cousin of John Calvin, and was the one who had first advised Calvin to study the scriptures. His translation was published in 1535, and include a preface by Calvin. In the preface, Calvin notes the importance of vernacular translations.

This book we have translated as faithfully as we were able according to the truth and the style of the Greek language, to enable all Christians, men and women, who know the French language, to understand and acknowledge the law they ought to obey and the faith they ought to follow.

And later he rails against those who have tried to suppress such attempts.

O you who call yourselves bishops and pastors of the poor people, see to it that the sheep of Jesus Christ are not deprived of their proper pasture; and that it is not prohibited and forbidden to any Christian freely and in his own language to read, handle, and hear this holy gospel, seeing that such is the will of God, and Jesus Christ commands it; for it is for this cause that he has sent his apostles and servants throughout the whole world; giving them the power to speak in all tongues, so that they may in every language preach to every creature; and he has made them debtors to the Greeks and the barbarians, to the wise and the simple, in order that none might be excluded from their teaching.

The vernacular Bibles of the Reformation had a profound impact on their languages. The Reformation fostered many literary works, and a significant portion of that literature that was produced was nurtured by the vernacular Bible.⁷⁰ A.G. Dickens said of the vernacular bible:

Especially during our golden seventeenth century the Bible worked as a midwife to bring forth a whole great literature. It enabled a tinker of Bedford to write *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In an age when Milton could believe that God had chosen his Englishmen to perform his special tasks, it was the Bible which

⁶⁹ David Crystal, *Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7.

⁷⁰ Lindberg, 370.

nerved the arm of Oliver Cromwell and fortified the spirit of the pioneers in New England.⁷¹

Perhaps most important of all was the role vernacular Bible played in the norming of languages. With the rise of the printing press a century before, languages were in a state of change in Europe as different dialects interacted with one another in more ways than ever before. The published books people read helped to set the pattern for grammar, expressions, and idioms. Reformers often helped to encourage the popularity of books among the masses. Olaus Petri, for example, is said to have helped transform the Swedish language, at least in written form, through his writing. Even the non-Christian or anti-Christian writing of this time was largely impacted by the way the church had transformed language. Even Shakespeare is often said to have formed his writing style under the influence of the English Bible translation and religious writing.

The Impact of Missions in Colonial Times

Missionary activity during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries generally increased. One commonality during this period was the large number of languages missionaries encountered. In places like India, the Americas, and the East Indies there were large numbers of languages present, and even more dialects. Missionaries were often forced to decide on what approach they would take to the multitude of languages, which ones would they learn, which ones would they prioritize for Bible translation and which one (if any) they would conduct services in.

The East Indies provides an example of this experience. There were many languages present in the East Indies at the time. There was a *lingua franca*⁷² available in the Malay language, but despite that a significant number of the population could not understand Malay. Some of the population understood a European language due to previous contacts with Europeans. And the presence of Islam also factored into the language mix. When it was decided to translate the Bible into Malay, there was debate over

⁷¹ A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* 2nd ed. (University Park, Penn.: Penn State Press, 1991), 157.

⁷² *lingua franca* here refers to a common language adopted by speakers who do not share the same native language for the purpose of communication.

which dialect, that of the educated class or that of the larger population. There was also a question of which script to use, a Latin script or an Arabic script. Eventually, the Bible was printed in a Latin script in 1734, while an Arabic script version followed in 1759. Partially due to the obstacle this multitude of languages presented, the Christianity in the East Indies was largely superficial. Despite the number of Christians being reported as forty thousand, by 1660 there was only twenty-one ministers. That improved to thirty-four by 1730, but only five could preach in a language other than their native Dutch.⁷³

The mission of the Franciscans in New Spain during the 18th century provides another example of language being viewed as an obstacle to the church. The missionaries to the Native Americans to an approach to promote Spanish in their work. Many of them never learned a native tongue, instead relying on interpreters. Often, the zeal of the missionaries outpaced their language acquisition. And in the schools started by missionaries, the children learned creed's in prayer in Latin until the missionaries could become proficient enough in the native language to offer instruction in it. By the 18th century, the King of Spain had declared the used of any vernacular illegal, and that the teaching of Spanish to the native population was obligatory. This often meant that before they could learn of Christ, the people had to first learn Spanish. While some of them attempted to evangelize the local non-Christians, very few of them new anything about the languages of those people.

Often, missionaries became just as much of a force in spreading their own language as they did in acquiring that of the people groups they sought to convert. It was common for missionaries to setup schools and to include their native language among the subjects taught. And in many places, no organized effort existed to spread the gospel to other language groups. In Siberia, for instance, as Russia colonized the region, clergy were sent. But they chiefly focused on ministering to the Russian colonists.

Things were different in Peru, where Fransico de Toledo was Viceroy. Among other things, he stressed that priests only be put in charge of parishes if they could speak the local language. And he set

⁷³ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: Volume 3 Three Centuries of Advance* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1937), 305.

up a department at the University of Lima to aid in the study of the local languages, requiring candidates for parishes to pass an examine about the language of their parish. The attitude towards local language varied from time to time and place to place. In the end, Spanish missionaries were responsible for creating a script for writing in many Native American languages, and even wrote the first instances of literature in those languages.

Colonialism often saw the vernacular languages of their colonies as an obstacle to them becoming, at least in their estimation, more civilized. Because of this, vernacular languages were often discouraged as a practice, and instead the language of the colonizers was taught. As Harriet Hill notes, “Local languages, if recognized as languages at all, were perceived to imprison people in their ‘barbaric’ past. Many missionaries in this era set out with the noble intention of ‘civilizing’ the people they went to serve by teaching them Western culture and languages.”⁷⁴ In addition, when the colony consisted of multiple tribal groups or people groups, their vernacular languages were viewed as reinforcing the rivalries the existed between the groups. A national language, it was thought, would encourage their unity. But this had the effect of eroding the sense of identity they had as a group.

The Approach in Modern Missions

Modern mission is largely considered to have started with William Carey, commonly referred to as the “father of modern missions.” During his work in India, Carey translated the Bible into seven different languages: Arabic, Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Marathi, Oriya, and Sanskrit. The choice of producing a translation into Sanskrit was noteworthy. The language was no longer in use as a native language for any part of the world. But Carey believed that the Sanskrit translation would aid the in acceptance of the Bible by the religious leaders in India. And he also hoped it could be used as a source

⁷⁴ Harriet Hill, “The Vernacular Treasures: A Century of Mother-Tongue Bible,” *International Bulletin* 30, no 2 (2006): 82.

for other vernacular translations by Indians who did not know Greek or Hebrew.⁷⁵ Carey also produced Bengali and Sanskrit grammar and translated Bengali literature. The work of the group he started in India helped to influence the growth of prose writing in Bengali. And his influence on missions had ramifications in the societies that came after him. His work influenced the Bible societies and Bible translation groups that would come after him, including Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

One of the more common approaches of missions today is to focus efforts around Bible translations. These groups often must also create a written alphabet for the languages, as most of the languages where the Bible does not exist are oral languages only. Wycliffe Bible Translators, as an organization, is dedicated to the goal of having a translation of the Bible in every living language. This has often come from the concept of “heart language.” The idea of “heart language” is that some of the deeper meaning and impact of scripture and the gospel message is lost when it is presented in a second or third language.⁷⁶ While these organizations don’t deny the ability of the gospel to be effective in a second or third language, they argue that it doesn’t “speak to their hearts” as deeply when not in their native language.

The efforts of such organizations have a lasting impact on the languages and cultures they work in. Lamin Sanneh argues that the approach Bible translation mirrors the incarnational nature of Christ.

In many traditional societies, religious language has tended to be confined to a small elite of professionals. In extreme cases, this language is shrouded under the forbidding sanctions of secret societies and shrines, access to which is through induced trances or a magical formula. The Christian approach to translatability strikes at the heart of such gnostic tendencies, first by contending that the greatest and most profound religious truths are compatible with

⁷⁵ William Allen Smalley *Translation as Mission: Bible Translation in the Modern Missionary Movement* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1991), 45.

⁷⁶ <https://www.wycliffe.org.uk/blog/2016/03/bible-translation-101-why-translate-the-bible/>

everyday language, and second, by targeting ordinary men and women as worthy bearers of the religious message.⁷⁷

This effect is empowering on the language. Sanneh even relates accounts where, after having been provided a translation of the Bible into their languages, groups were able to use that translation to respond to the attitudes and approaches of those same missionaries.

Summary

Throughout history, the church has had various interactions with language. It has sometimes embraced new languages and the opportunity to use the vernacular, everyday language of people, while at other times it has worked against the common language or the language of a different culture. But by and large the history indicates a recurring pattern of embracing new language. The number of translations made of the Bible speak to this. It is clear that Christians associated the spread of the faith with the need to translate the scripture into the new languages they encountered.

⁷⁷ Lamin Sanneh, "Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex," *The Christian Century* (April 1987). Accessed 20 October 2017; <http://ejesus.com.br/christian-missions-and-the-western-guilt-complex/>.

CHAPTER 4

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF LANGUAGE

The Image of God

As stated earlier, one of the clearest implications of being created in the image of God is the use of language. To speak is to be human, and to be human is to be made in God's image. That image has been affected by sin, but it remains. John Frame, recognizing this, writes, "Language is, I maintain, and indispensable element of the image of God in which we were created."⁷⁸ It is such an important factor of what it means to being created in the image of God, that it is perhaps, the most distinguishing feature of being human. It is a part of all human experience and expression, and of human culture. Charles Sherlock states, "Language is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of human culture."⁷⁹

Given that language was God's tool of creation and that man was created in the image of God, it is noteworthy how different the act of God creating man is. The account in Genesis 1 doesn't tell follow the typical pattern. We do not find "Let there be a man." Instead, we see a discussion by the trinity (as discussed earlier) but then simply the creation of man. Genesis 2 gives an even starker difference when it records that God formed man out the dust of the ground and breathed life into him. Breath is the thing that carries forth our speech. It is the original medium of language communication. In recognizing this, Walter Benjamin writes:

God did not create man from the word, and he did not name him. He did not wish to subject him to language, but in man God set language, which had served him as medium of creation, free. God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge. Man is the knower in the same language in which God is the creator. God created him in his image; he created the knower in the image of the creator.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1987), 240.

⁷⁹ Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 143.

⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Selected Writings*, ed Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 68.

Language is a gift to humans by God, and unlike any other part of God's creation, it does not seem humans were created using language. Rather, by creating them in the image of God, with his breath, God enables them to use language. Human language is both similar and different to the divine language. This is because humans are not fully God, we are made in the image of him, but are not equal to him. But our language exists because of that image. That is largely due to the relational nature of God. Since God exists in three persons, God exists in relationship with himself. That relationship defines God. And to be in relationship necessitates communication. Similarly, man is created to be a relational being. This is evident in God's decision to create Eve.

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him.

God recognizes that the man needs someone else to be present with him, to provide a relationship, since the man is a relational being just like God. The animals were not suitable for this task. Adam needed someone equal to him. He needed a relationship in which he could communicate as equals and express himself through language.

Being made in the image of God also means that our speech is patterned after God. The very nature of God, his attributes, are present in human language. Poythress argues that the person of the trinity also each correspond to the three parts of communication: speaker, speech, and hearer. In this view, the Father corresponds to the speaker, the Son is the speech, and the Spirit is the hearer. Genesis 1 supports the notion that the Father, the first person of the trinity, is the speaker. Likewise, John 1 illustrates that role of the Son, the second person of the trinity, as the speech by denoting him as "the Word." The Spirit, as the breath of God, carries the message of God to a destination and, through its illuminating power, empowers the recipients to truly "hear" the message. That illuminating presence of

the Spirit means that the Spirit dwells in the hearer. The Spirit is one with the hearer, thus completing the three aspects of communication.⁸¹

This pattern of communication present in the Trinity shows that the image of God in human creates the same pattern of communication. We act as speakers, put forth speech, carried by our breath to hearers. We follow the Trinity when we speak. But Poythress goes further. Building on John Frame's triad of lordship in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, Poythress puts forth three aspects of God's speak: meaning (a slight adaption of Frame's "authority), control, and presence. Poythress closely associates these with God's attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence.⁸² God's speech exerts meaning by defining what things are. His words are meaningful. God's speech demonstrates control by its effectiveness. The thing God says happen, both in Genesis and throughout the entirety of scripture. God's speech shows his presence because his words expresses his attributes.

Since human are made in God's image, our speech is an image of God's speech. Adam, for example, in naming the animals demonstrated meaning, control, and presence. The names Adam gives the animals categorize and classify them. His words control because they define that animal for all future humans. They show his presence because his words demonstrate his desires and his thoughts. Today, we can do the same with our speech. Our words carry meaning. They can define and categorize things. They also exert our control over the world. We can use them to change the world around us, often by influencing others or providing instructions. And the demonstrate presence by expressing our desires, thoughts, and feelings.

But sin has complicated all of this. Because of sin, language can be used for evil purposes. Governments have used language in the form of propaganda to control others for evil. It has been used to express meaning that is false. It has been used to put forth desires and feelings that are opposed to God's intentions. Even on the small scale, this is true of our speech. We can lie to one another and can

⁸¹ Poythress, 19-21.

⁸² Poythress, 25-26.

try to manipulate each other. The ways in which language can be used are not neutral. This is the fallen aspects of the image of God in us.

Human language is inescapably linked to the fact that humans are created in the image of God. Our ability to communicate, the ways in which we can be creative, are all reflections of the image of God. As Klingbeil notes:

Human ability for meaningful and abstract speech seems to have been part and parcel of having been created in the image and likeness of the God who created by fiat. In fact, language in creation, in divine and human speech seems to highlight the breadth of the biblical concept of the *imago dei*.⁸³

Human Languages as a Vehicle for God's Communication

Numerous times in the Old Testament, the phrase *אָמַר יְהוָה כֹּה*, often translated as “thus says the Lord” appears. Prophets use the phrase to convey messages from God to his people. The messages themselves appear as vocal speech utterances from God. The author of Hebrews notes this divine communication when he writes “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.” (Hebrews 1:1) God repeatedly communicated to his people in human language. This incarnational approach to communication allows human language to express divine messages and thoughts.

Despite the sinful effects the fall had on human language, it was still able to serve as the tool by which God could communicate with his people in conversation. The people could (and still are able to) hear God as well as speak to him in human language. In God's use of human language, we see him condescending to communicate, but at the same time we recognize that the very reason such a thing is possible is image of God in man.

The author of Hebrews ties this same kind of incarnational approach to communication to the ultimate communication of the divine: the person of Christ when he continues to state, “but in these

⁸³ Gerald A. Klingbeil, “‘He Spoke and It Was’: Human Language, Divine Creation and the *imago dei*,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 36 (2014): 58.

last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” This idea not only relates the use of human language as the vehicle of divine communication to the incarnation of the Son as an even greater vehicle for the same, it does so while at the same time drawing on the role of the Son in creation as the Word of God. God’s communication through human language expresses his immanence.

Since God saw fit to use human language as the method of communication for his plan of salvation, we can be assured of our use of it to carry that message to the ends of the earth. We can be confident in the ability of languages to communicate the gospel. Poythress writes “God is infinitely wise, and infinitely deep in his knowledge. If God makes himself known in the textures of language, it means that language itself may be rich.”⁸⁴ The richness of language assures of the ability to communicate the richness of the gospel.

The Cultural Nature of Language

As already mentioned, language is deeply cultural. When we speak in our native language, we signal to others not just the meaning of our words, but a shared common culture. Even in the dialects of American English this is true. If someone born and raised in New England was conversing with a stranger and that stranger was born in raised in the South, they would both immediately recognize something about each other. First, they would be able to tell that, even with their different accents, they had some common cultural aspects. They would recognize each other as American. Second, they would recognize the difference between each other. While similar, they don’t have identical cultural heritage. Even if the words they speak have nothing to do with these ideas, their language itself signals it.

The relationship between language and culture, more accurately language and worldview, has been an ongoing debate for the past century. In the early part of the twentieth century, what is often popularly referred to as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis developed. Named for Edward Sapir and his student

⁸⁴ Poythress, 23.

Benjamin Whorf, the hypothesis was that language of a culture limits and constrains the thoughts and behaviors of people in that culture. In the strongest expression, called Linguistic determinism, language determines the ways in which people think. In a weaker expression, language influences, but does not determine, human thought. Linguistic determinism has now largely been proven false, but the ways in which language can influence thought are still being explored.

There are some universals about language. Among other things: They use a limited set of sounds. Not all languages use the same sounds, but the number of sounds is finite. This is because humans are only capable of producing certain sounds. Those sounds are combined to form words. In all languages, the words can be categorized as objects or actions (i.e. nouns and verbs). Those words are combined to form sentences (properly speaking, utterances). All languages have a means to ask questions. They all possess ways of expressing negatives.⁸⁵ But languages also differ from each other. Some languages have grammatical gender systems. In these languages, all nouns are assigned a gender. Other languages, like English, there is no such system. These differences in languages often express cultural differences. They can even shape how the world is viewed by their speakers.

In a recent study, linguists created a list of objects that had opposite grammatical genders in German and Spanish. They then asked native speakers to write down adjectives related to those objects. Those adjectives were then rated as being either masculine or feminine. In both cases, the adjectives used to describe the object closely matched the grammatical gender of the object. One of the words used was “bridge” which is grammatically masculine in Spanish, but feminine in German. The Spanish speakers used adjectives such as *strong*, *sturdy*, and *towering*, while the German speakers use terms such as *elegant*, *fragile*, *pretty*, and *slender*.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1989), 19-25.

⁸⁶ Lera Boroditsky, Lauren A. Schmidt, and Webb Phillips. "Sex, Syntax, and Semantics," in *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Cognition*, ed. Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadows (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 69-70.

Another example of this impact is demonstrated by the difference between languages can be noted by examining languages that rely on relative frames of reference (such as English) with those that rely on absolute frames of reference (such as Kuuk Thaayorre and other Aboriginal languages). In languages with a relative frame of reference, words such as “left,” “right,” “forward,” and “back” are used to define space relative to the observer. But in languages with an absolute frame of reference, cardinal directions – north, south, east, and west – are used. Speakers of these languages would use phrases such as “your east leg” instead of “your left leg.” This requires them to be constantly aware of their orientation. Not surprisingly, speakers of these kinds of languages are much better at orienting themselves than speakers of languages that define space relatively.

Now, consider a Bible translation effort among this kind of language. What should be done with a phrase such as “son of my right hand” in such a context? The idea of “right hand” would be rather foreign to such people. Even if they had come to learn English or Hebrew quite thoroughly, and understood the meaning of the phrase, would it be as meaningful an expression to them as one using an idiom from their own language and culture? This is what language offers. The opportunity to place the gospel message into the context of a people group’s culture by means of their language. The pattern for this is the Incarnation of Christ. By becoming flesh, Christ bring God’s plan of salvation to humans. He dwells among us. Christ experiences what it is to be human. By understanding a language, we can better understand how speakers of that language experience the world. And the more we understand how they view and experience the world, the more we can understand how to contextualize the gospel message to their culture.

This is the greatest advantage of language for the gospel message. The incarnational presentation of the message works to emphasize the incarnational approach of Christ. Compare this to Islam, for instance. In Islam, Arabic is viewed as Allah’s language. It is the language in which Allah created the Quran. It is viewed as an “uncreated” book. Muslims often take the view that the Quran

should not be translated into another language. Christianity, though, gives no special position to a particular language. The authors of Scripture write under inspiration of God, not dictation. The Bible is not “uncreated.” While scripture hold an important place in Christian theology, overall, the focus of Christianity is the person of Christ more than it is scripture. There seems to have never been much effort to record or recover the original words of Jesus. Instead, we are often left with Greek translations of what he said. In the few places where we have what seem to be direct quotes of Jesus in the gospels, other gospel writers don’t consider those quotes so important that they must be included in their accounts of the same event. This means that the Christian message is more suited to be expressed in the language and cultural situation of a recipient. To truly know Christ or to know God’s message does not require someone to learn a particular language. It requires someone to speak to them. As Paul wrote:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Romans 10:14-15)

By studying a language, we can see the aspects of its worldview. A culture’s language will reflect its values and its thought process. For example, a language that lacks tenses or has few words to connote time might struggle with to be receptive to a message about eternity. By understanding language, we can understand the people that speak that language.

Language Universals and Relativism

Since the work of Sapir and Whorf, many linguists have been critical of the emphasis placed on the cultural relativism of language. Noam Chomsky, for one, has worked to demonstrate the commonalities between otherwise diverse languages. He writes “The existence of deep-seated formal universals... implies that all languages are cut to the same pattern, but does not imply that there is any point by point correspondence between particular languages.”⁸⁷ Chomsky argues that there is a “system

⁸⁷ Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965), 30.

of linguistic universals” implied by the ability of children to learn the language of their parents. Hesselgrave points out that this universal aspect to language is expected from a Christian worldview. Since the origin of all human languages is God and the fact that humans are created in his image, we should expect all human languages to share some common traits. Even more so since they share a common origin in the language spoken by Adam and Eve. Hesselgrave writes:

Languages are not purely human productions that press the world into human molds and radically distort it. Man does not simply impose his rationality on the perceived world. Rather, the world, man, and his languages possess a common rationality imposed by God.⁸⁸

That is not to say that there are not relative aspects to language. Chomsky pointed out that, despite the universals, there is not to be expected a one to one relationship between aspects of any two languages. And Hesselgrave also notes that more recent research seems to imply that worldview and language influence each other, rather than simply worldview influencing language or language influencing worldview. Studies such as the ones mentioned above demonstrate that the gender association to objects (nouns) in language seemed to influence the ways those objects were described. Other studies have shown that words can influence cognitive ability. One well known study demonstrated that groups that had done word association exercises that contained the words “rope,” “swing,” and “pendulum” were able to solve a problem that required them to tie together to ropes that were positioned far enough apart that they could not reach one that was stationary while holding the other. It seems the simple recent familiarity with the words, even outside of the context of the challenge they’d have to solve, enabled them to reach the required solution.

Poythress argues that the universal aspects of all human language are explained not only by God’s role as the origin of language, but also God’s sustaining control of language. Poythress argues that since God’s governance extends to even the smallest details, it also extends to language. That control is

⁸⁸ David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 370.

evident in the large aspects and events of language, such as the Tower of Babel, and in the meaning of each word in every language.⁸⁹ Since God is the sustainer of language, we should expect that he has governed each language in such a way as to make it capable of communicating the gospel message in an effective way. And we can expect that each language can do so in a way that is impactful on the speakers of that language.

The dynamics between the universal aspects of language and the cultural relativity of language are key to the great opportunity it holds for the gospel. Because of the underlying universals of language, we can be sure that every language is able to express and communicate the gospel message. There will not exist a language that is so vastly different from all other languages that it is incapable of conveying the message of salvation. At the same time, the cultural aspects of language mean that there exists a way to express the gospel in each language that is meaningful and significant to that culture. Language allows us insight into the worldview of a culture and therefore provides avenues for the gospel to relate and speak to that worldview.

Language Rules

Every language follows a set of rules. Those rules may differ from language to language in things such as grammatical word order for sentences, but each language has its own set of rules. It is God that sustains those rules. And in those rules, we can see evidence of God's character. While the rules of language can be broken, the fact the rules exist is evident even when they are broken. It is obvious that when an English speaker says, "walks to school, the boy" he is breaking the grammatical rules about sentence. Any fluent speaker of English can tell that something is wrong with the sentence. It is that "wrongness" that demonstrates the existence of the rules. Poythress makes note of many aspects of language rules that shows God's character. What follows is a summary of his ideas.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Poythress, 39-40.

⁹⁰ Poythress, 64-77.

Language rules are omnipresent. Wherever a language is spoken, the rules for that language exist. This is true not just across the world, but across time. The language we understand as modern English is always accompanied by the rules for modern English. Likewise, the rules of a language are eternal. Even as linguists reconstruct long dead languages, they do so by reconstructing the rules of that language. Language rules are also immutable. While languages themselves change, in doing so they create new languages (or at the least new dialects). Poythress also notes language rules are invisible. We cannot see the rules themselves, only the impacts it has on the language it governs. Lastly, language rules are true. It is because of these ways that language reflects God's own character and nature that language is a suitable vehicle for God's message. Since the vehicle reflects God's nature, it can express truths about God. This should give us confidence in our use of language. Since our method of communication is itself created by God and reflective of God's nature, we can expect it to be effective.

Language and Missions

Language is often a key area to be considered for missionaries. It is typical today for missionaries to go to cultures and people with whom they do not share a native language. As the church fulfills the mission to be witnesses of Christ to the ends of the earth, we must surely expect to encounter languages in which the name of Christ has never been spoken. So, it becomes important for missionaries to not just learn a new language, but to understand the role of language and its ability to impact the recipients of the gospel message. Leslie Newbigin writes this about the importance of truly learning a language:

Traditions of rationality are embodied in languages. A rival tradition cannot become a serious threat to the adherents of an existing tradition unless these latter are able to learn the language in which the rival tradition is embodied. One may learn a language at two levels. It may be simply a second language: the learner continues to think and reason in the native language, but learns to find words and phrases in the second language which correspond as closely as possible to those of the first language. But one may acquire what MacIntyre calls a 'second first language,' a language which is learned in the same way that a child learns to use the native tongue. A missionary or anthropologist who really hopes to understand and enter into the adopted culture will not do so by

trying to learn the language the way a tourist uses a phrasebook or dictionary. It must be learned in the way a child learns to speak, not by finding word to match one's own existing stock, but by learning to think and to speak it in the way the people of the country do.⁹¹

When missionaries engage cultures and learn a language this way, they can allow the gospel message to penetrate a culture. Sanneh, in his book on Bible translation, discusses the principle of reciprocity. The idea is that an effective translation of the Bible must be focused on “terms of the target culture.”⁹² There are many accounts (Sanneh reports many of them) where translators are confronted with a language that lacks a word for a particular idea in the Bible. Whether it be landlocked, desert cultures that have no word for “anchor” or Eskimo’s that have no word for lamb, there are times where it is obvious that a direct translation isn’t possible. But, Sanneh argues, the best approach is not to provide a literal translation even when such a thing is technically possible. Sanneh constantly talks about Bible translation being done in the “everyday” or “ordinary speech” of the people it is for. It is in such approaches that Christianity can impact culture. Sanneh writes, “On the other hand, translation may set the stage for a trickle-down effect on the rest of society, producing a raised level of interest and consciousness.”

Just as God used human language to incarnate his message to his people, missionaries can use the language of the community they serve to incarnate that message for them. The importance of learning and using the language of the recipient is why David Hesselgrave writes, “If one wants to communicate Christ to a people, he must know them. The key to that knowledge always has been, and always will be, language.”⁹³ Paul expresses this idea in the tenth chapter of Romans as mentioned above.

⁹¹ Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 55-56.

⁹² Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2009), 237.

⁹³ Hesselgrave, 355.

Paul's line of thinking should cause us to stop and thinking about how effectively someone can hear when the message is not in their own language. If the pattern of our communication of the gospel is Christ's communication of the gospel, then our pattern needs to reflect the incarnational aspects of Christ's mission. Christ became human to communicate and accomplish God's plan of salvation in his life and death. Likewise, we can put that message into the 7,000 languages of the world to communicate it to the people of those languages.

Hesselgrave emphasizes the importance of language for missionaries when he writes, "The use of the respondent language is part of the credentials of the missionary communicator. It is part of the process of winning a hearing."⁹⁴

Barriers of Language Translation in Missions

In October 2016, Wycliffe Global Alliance reported the number of languages that had at least some scripture translated into them at 3,223. Of that number, 636 languages have a translation of the complete Bible. The languages that do not have a complete Bible account for 1.5 billion people.⁹⁵ The World Bank estimated the earth's population in 2016 at 7.442 billion people.⁹⁶ Taken together, that means that approximately one-fifth of the world's population lacked the complete scriptures in the language they speak best. While Bible translations efforts continue to reach increasingly more languages, many of the world's languages are disappearing. Approximately 25% of the languages in use today have fewer than a thousand speakers. Many of them will disappear before Bible translation work can even begin, let alone finish. Many barriers and challenges exist that hinder even more translation.

One of the biggest barriers to reaching the remaining languages with Bible translation are the lack of access to the people that speak them. Government restrictions, violence, and even geography

⁹⁴ Hesselgrave, 385.

⁹⁵ Wycliffe Global Alliance, available from <http://www.wycliffe.net/statistics>; Internet; accessed 30 September 2017.

⁹⁶ World Bank, available from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>; Internet; accessed 30 September 2017.

can make it difficult if not impossible for linguists to study and learn languages. These factors inhibit the ability for translators to work with the native speakers of a language to receive feedback and cooperation on translation efforts.

“Unreached” groups pose an even greater challenge. In such situations the work of translation is difficult and slow. Since there are few or no native speaker of the language in these cases, translators must work to contextualize the uniquely Christian concepts and terminology that are part of the translation of scripture. Without direct access to native speakers, producing a translation is nearly an impossible task. In other cases, there are no Christian native speakers.

There is also a lack of qualified and trained workers for the task.⁹⁷ The requirements for such work are substantial with regards to languages with little to no previous linguistic work. The situation harkens to Jesus’ words that “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Matthew 9:37-38)⁹⁸ The only hope of the gospel reaching all the language groups of the world is for more laborers. And the only hope for more laborers is the work of God to send more of his people out among those language groups.

The Eschatological Impact of Multiple Languages

As mentioned previously, the Bible makes clear the role language plays in the diversity of the people of God. Language is a sign of diversity from the moment multiple languages existed. It was how the table of nations in Genesis 10 is divided. “From these the coastland peoples spread in their lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations.” (Genesis 10:5). And as the different groups are listed, the same phrase is repeated in verses 20, 31. I have also already mentioned Daniel’s vision of the Son of Man, where languages are used to express just how all-encompassing the kingdom of the Son of Man will be. And we’ve seen in the same idea in Revelation.

⁹⁷ Willis Ott and JP. "Understanding Why Two Thousand Languages Still Have No Bible Translation in Progress," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2016): 52.

⁹⁸ Also recorded in Luke 10:2.

What is striking about these passages is the picture is not of God's people having one language (not a reversal of Babel), but that somehow the beauty of the kingdom of God is in part because of the diversity of the languages of its members. Just as human culture has progressed from a garden in Genesis to a city in Revelation, so too has it moved from speaking one language to speaking many different ones. A diversity of languages continues to exist for all eternity. But in eternity they are in no way a barrier. After all, John can understand what everyone in heaven is saying despite their language. Rather, the diversity of language has been perfected to become an opportunity to worship God.

Summary

Language is intrinsically part of human culture as much as it is a part of being human. It is easy to see how it can be an obstacle to the advance of the gospel, since it can create a barrier between missionary and respondent. But at the same time, it provides a clear way for the missionary to access and understand the respondent's culture. Learning a language of culture can be a way to incarnate the gospel to that culture. It is there that the strength of language for missions lies. It allows the missionary to truly go to the people he or she would seek to reach with the gospel.

Language also expresses what it means to be human, specifically in relation to what it means to be made in the image of God. It gives us insight into God's character and nature. It shows us how he has sustained the world. Though there can be fear and intimidation in approaching the barriers languages create, we can also have confidence in the God that governs and rules over all languages. We can be sure that he has ordered things so that his message of salvation can reach to the ends of the earth and into every language spoken on it. Thinking that way won't make learning a language any easier, but it will provide promise of the reward for doing so.

The study of language is an opportunity for anyone that would seek to understand a culture better, whether that culture is foreign or their own. It can give us insight into how people think and what is in their heart.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Language is a complex topic, made all the harder to discuss and evaluate because it is the very tool we use to do so. But it is evident that language is part of what it means to be human. Humans derive their ability for language from the fact that God has created us in his own image. And it is for this reason that language can get to the heart of mankind's thoughts and needs. And it is why our native language can be truly a "heart language." Our native language provides us familiarity and comfort. It sets our minds thinking in the ways we are most practiced in thinking. And it is for this reason that language is such a great opportunity for the expansion of the gospel. By presenting the gospel in the language of the receptor, they are best afforded the chance to truly understand it.

Historically, the church has seen the benefit of this approach, as evidenced by the early church leading the advance of alphabet and writing development in so many cultures and languages. There have been times when the church has failed to hold fast to that approach, but its recent history indicates it has returned to understanding the importance of linguistics and language in the work of missions. The love for other cultures, which the gospel inspires, should be a great motivation in the development of alphabets and translation efforts in the languages that remain unreached for the gospel.

As a church, we can look forward to a redeemed, multi-cultural, multi-lingual body of Christ, worshipping God in many languages, but in one voice. The multitude of languages will only provide more ways to express the wonders of God's love and to praise his for his acts of mercy. By embracing the many languages present in the world, the visible church not only becomes more like the picture of heaven we see in Revelation, but also becomes more like her Lord by incarnating itself to the ends of the Earth.

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