A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING VERBAL OPPRESSION IN MARRIAGE

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APPROVAL SHEET

A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING VERBAL OPPRESSION IN MARRIAGE

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To my husband, RJ, who made it happen once again. To my parents, Jan and Steve, who refuse to see anything but the best in me. To my parents-in-law, Ralph and Corinne, who awarded me a doctorate years before I would earn one. To my children—Kasey, Christian, Kelsey, Colson, Katie, and Calvin—who were with me through all my stages of trying and often failing to impart the gospel of grace. To Mrs. Riddle, who would not rest until I mastered English and writing, way back when I was far too young to understand the benefits of diagramming hundreds, if not thousands, of sentences.

And to my Savior and his visible-to-me bride, my local church.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANE	Ancient Near East
ANF	*Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to AD 325*. 10 vols. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885–1897.
EGGNT	Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament
1 Apol.	Justin Martyr, *1 Apology*
Haer.	Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*
Inst.	John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
Inc.	Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*
IVPNTC	IVP New Testament Commentary
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JBC	*Journal of Biblical Counseling*
JBMW	*Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*
JRT	*Journal of Reformed Theology*
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
ST	*The Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benzinger Bros., 1947
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
Trin.	Augustine, *De Trinitate*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

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PREFACE

I still remember the evening in 2017 when I got down on my knees and asked God for the privilege of pursuing my doctorate at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. By the Lord's unmerited favor, I was indeed granted the opportunity to study under and alongside some of the most gracious, humble, and scholarly individuals I could have imagined.

I owe tremendous thanks to my dissertation committee. My supervisor, Robert D. Jones, devoted countless hours to my writing process. Additionally, his teaching birthed in me a fervent appreciation and love for the local church. His and Lauren's frequent invitations to share dinner and conversation with them made them not just mentors, but friends. How grateful I am for the wisdom and counsel they generously imparted. I am also exceedingly grateful to Jeremy Pierre for leading my counseling theory and practice into deeper theological waters. Likewise, I cannot adequately thank Kyle Claunch for introducing me to classical theism and patiently guiding me toward greater theological precision in my discussion of the Trinity.

Cyndy Lowery has been my iron that sharpens iron. I cannot imagine having persevered through this program without her support—and our many trips in search of cake. The Lord also kindly knitted me together in meaningful friendship and labor with several sisters: Pamela Cubas, Angela Shelton, Laura-Lee Alford, and Dee Buscetto. Our male colleagues, without exception, have treated us women with kindness and respect. Lucas Sabatier has especially provided tremendous encouragement to me. I ever seek to emulate his example of scholarship and humility.

I also wish to thank biblical counselors outside my seminary cohort whose

knowledge and encouragement contributed to this work. I am immensely grateful to my friends Nathan Moore and Nate Brooks for their wisdom and encouragement and to others whose work benefitted me, especially Darby Strickland, Chris Moles, Joy Brown Forrest, Ann Maree Goudzwaard, Greg Wilson, Kirsten Christianson, Tabi Westbrook, and others, too numerous to list.

I owe special thanks also to Pierce Taylor Hibbs, Marc Cortez, Kevin Vanhoozer, Jared Poulton, Alisha Biler, and Jacob McMillian, each of whom kindly interacted with my litany of questions regarding their work and mine. Similarly, I benefitted from enriching conversations with Gus Chaydez. Laura-Lee Alford not only helped with editing but also provided invaluable interaction and ideas. Nick Campbell contributed tremendous insight regarding Old Testament examples of verbal oppression. Jennifer Stec added final editorial touches. I would be remiss not to mention two of my previous professors at Southwestern Seminary. Jeffrey Bingham deepened my love for systematic theology exponentially—along with my appreciation for the centrality of language in theology. Greg Smith helped me understand how the Old Testament speaks to abuse.

While theology might be learned in the classroom, it is lived, tested, and refined in the context of the local church. I thank God for pastors and elders who have shepherded me and allowed me to serve Christ's bride, especially James Sharp and Matt Evans. Finally, I praise God for giving me such a friend as Kristen Sharp, whose unwavering kindness has sustained me through a season of deep sorrow.

All of this and more, I do not deserve. All glory be to Christ!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, the topic of abuse has moved to the forefront of conversations and debates within seminaries, churches, denominations, and parachurch ministries. Increasingly, leaders have wrestled not only to define abuse and its subcomponents but also to determine how to address and, better still, prevent it from occurring among those under their care. When it comes to matters of physical and sexual abuse, leaders often recognize quickly the destructiveness entailed and an urgent need for intervention. Less can be said regarding forms of abuse that do not outwardly or directly appear to harm or violate the victim's body, such as verbal oppression. Partially, a lack of awareness and urgency among leaders regarding verbal oppression may stem from an underdeveloped understanding of the nature of language according to a theological framework.

At its very core, language is theological; therefore, believers should view and govern language through a theological lens. Far from being a benign misstep, the misuse of language reveals hearts oriented away from God, his purposes, his standards, and the people whom speakers are called to serve. As John Newton observes, "If the tongue is frequently without a bridle; if it may be observed that a person often speaks lightly of God and of divine things, proudly of himself, harshly of his fellow creatures; if it can be affirmed with truth that he is a liar, a talebearer, a railer, a flatterer, or a jester; then whatever other good qualities he may seem to possess, his speech betrayeth him; he deceiveth himself, his religion is vain."[1] Speech, therefore, provides a diagnostic view of

[1] John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, vol. 4 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2015), 588.

a heart that is oriented either toward God, his purposes, his standards, and the people the speaker is called to serve or toward self, selfish motives, and self-interest.

Various authors use an assortment of verbs to describe behaviors that fall under the category of verbal abuse or oppression. Steven Tracy argues that oppressive words "belittle, undermine, scapegoat, or maliciously manipulate" another person.[2] Darby Strickland speaks of words that blame, shame, threaten, degrade, terrorize, accuse, or devalue.[3] Jeremy Pierre and Greg Wilson add humiliate, exploit, and intimidate to the mix, among other terms.[4] I will use these terms and others in my dissertation and will suggest a taxonomy by which such terms can be helpfully categorized according to their function.

This dissertation serves as my contribution to the conversation regarding the verbal form of spousal oppression. My goal is to help counselors and ministry leaders understand and identify verbal oppression in the context of marriage according to a theological framework and to bring appropriate scripturally informed counsel to the oppressor and the oppressed. As counselors and ministers of the gospel devote increasing attention to non-physical forms of oppression, more scholarly research and writing are needed to expand and enhance a biblical perspective and approach. My ultimate hope is that my dissertation will serve the church and spur further theological research and dialogue regarding verbal and other forms of spousal oppression.

Thesis

In this dissertation, I argue that since language originates in the triune God,

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[2] Steven R. Tracy, *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 34.

[3] Darby A. Strickland, *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2019), 180–82.

[4] Jeremy Pierre and Greg Wilson, *When Home Hurts : A Guide for Responding Wisely to Domestic Abuse in Your Church* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2021), 53.

married image bearers are commanded to use language in ways that reflect God's character, function according to his purposes, and conform to his moral standards, to the benefit of their spouses and their marital covenant. Through the gift of language, God has empowered humanity to know, love, and commune with him and one another, building one another up in love toward his design for human flourishing. Verbal oppression occurs when a person instead habitually and/or severely misuses his or her linguistic capacities toward the detriment of another, especially when the speaker holds significant influence over the other. Such oppression violates the chief design purpose of language—which is love that builds up—and constitutes violations against God, the spouse, and the marital covenant itself. Such speech carries the power to detrimentally impact the spouse in both soul and body.

Methodology

As a work of practical theology, my text-based dissertation will present a theological framework for assessing verbal oppression in marriage. From a *theological* perspective, I will affirm the Trinity as the origin and source of language because the triune God eternally self-communicates and has chosen language as the primary mechanism by which to reveal himself to humanity. Next, I will examine language from an *anthropological* perspective because, at creation, God imparted language to humans so that they could know him and one another and serve his purposes for his glory and the good of humanity. Subsequently, I will discuss language from a *moral* perspective because God, through Scripture, has revealed his moral standards to humanity to govern the way we speak to one another. Finally, I will consider language from a *covenantal* perspective because marriage, the most intimate human covenant, is entered into and sustained by the right use of language.

After I examine language through these four lenses, I will discuss the misuse of language and its effects and suggest implications for counseling. I formulate my

dissertation under the conviction that language is the primary means by which we as humans commune with God, each other, and the world around us.[5] Indeed, language is part of our very essence as beings who bear the image of a God who eternally self-communicates.[6] Finally, language is active and powerful and has been imparted to people to be used in accordance with God's words and for his purposes as revealed in Scripture.[7] In this light, I will examine verbal oppression and its synonyms as egregious sin against God, the spouse, and the marital covenant.

I embrace the following assumptions:

The authority and inerrancy of Scripture. As God's inerrant, infallible, and inspired self-revelation, the Bible serves as the authoritative source of knowledge and wisdom for humans as image bearers (2 Tim 3:16). All other sources of knowledge stand under Scripture's authority and must be scrutinized by their accordance—or lack thereof—with the divine truths contained in Scripture. Scripture has much to say about language and serves as the model by which human language should be assessed and evaluated.

The perfection of God's words as the expression of his perfect divine nature. God's words are perfect in intent, power, and effect, flowing from his perfect nature. Human words, likewise, serve as expressions of the human heart. Because humanity bears God's image and is called to be holy as he is holy, human words should reflect

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[5] See Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *The Speaking Trinity and His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 84–85.

[6] Vern Sheridan Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020), 131.

[7] John Frame includes as part of the cultural mandate found in Genesis 1:28 man's responsibility to develop a "language analogous to the word of God himself, building throughout the world a culture in conformity with it." See John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 789. As imago Dei, man derives a certain power through language from God's linguistic power. Poythress, addressing the power of language, however, contrasts man's limited control through language with God's omnipotent control. In both cases, language is a means of exercising control. However, man's ability to control is limited and subject to God's ultimate authority. See Poythress, *In the Beginning*, 35.

godly character, align with the truths revealed in his Word, and function according to his purposes, for the good of others.[8]

The active nature and power of language. With words, God creates, sustains, blesses, judges, redeems, comforts, and reveals. God's words exhibit power to bring order from chaos, light to darkness, and life from death. While human words lack the omnipotence of God's words and operate under God's ultimate authority, human words hold the power to build up or tear down, to create or destroy. Because God uses words for the benefit of those in covenant with him (and, by common grace, even to the benefit of those outside of covenantal relationship with him), I will argue that humans, likewise, are called to use language for the benefit of other image bearers, especially those within the context of covenant (Eph 4:29), and in particular, the marriage covenant. To use language and its power to the detriment of image bearers constitutes sin not only against those who suffer under oppressive language but against God himself.

Terminology

Marriage. I embrace a biblical definition of marriage as a lifelong covenantal union established and ordained by God between one man and one woman. Additionally, I adhere to a complementarian perspective of marriage in which husbands and wives are recognized as holding equal worth but differing gender roles. Nonetheless, counselors and ministry leaders who hold differing views on gender roles in marriage should find this dissertation helpful for addressing verbal oppression in marriage.

Verbal. I use the term "verbal" as an adjective pertaining to communication of human language through spoken words. While I acknowledge distinctions exist between the definitions of *language*, *words*, *speech*, and *communication*, I use these terms interchangeably. Further, I affirm non-vocalized forms of verbal communication, such as

[8] Hibbs, *Speaking Trinity*, xvi.

American sign language, as speech in which signs symbolize words and function in the same way as utterances. While I agree with Kenneth Pike that verbal and non-verbal behavior exist and function as unified whole, I will focus specifically on the use of words—or the withholding of them—to mistreat one's spouse.[9] Additionally, written communication represents speech that can be used as a means of verbal oppression, including language used in digital communication. The inclusion of written forms of language as speech should be assumed by the reader.

Oppression. I primarily use "oppression" to describe the misuse of capacities toward the detriment of others, especially in cases in which the one exhibiting the behavior holds a position of greater influence over the other. Although I will use the terms *oppression* and *abuse* somewhat interchangeably, *oppression* better represents the inherent dynamics that lead toward diminishing effects.

Argument

In chapter 2, I will argue that the triune God is the origin and source of language, recognizing this truth as the foundation that should shape how we understand and discuss the misuse of language toward spousal oppression. First, I will present scriptural passages that reveal God as the origin and source of language. I will discuss the historical development of our understanding of the Trinity and Trinitarian communication. Second, I will distinguish between the immanent and economic Trinity as foundational to understanding divine communication. Third, I will discuss eternal divine communication *ad intra*, the unceasing intra-Trinitarian speech of God. Fourth, I will discuss divine communication *ad extra*, which entails God's use of language in relation to the created order. Fifth, I will address God's use of communication and language in terms of nature, purpose, and functions, emphasizing that his internal speech

[9] See Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1967), 26.

is identical to his very nature while his use of language *ad extra* coheres perfectly with his nature and will.

In chapter 3, I will argue that language is anthropological in nature and that humans, as image bearers, have been gifted a linguistic capacity that carries power by which they influence and are influenced by one another. After discussing prevalent theories of what it means to be an image bearer, I will argue that language is image-bearing behavior that has been endowed to humanity so we can know, love, and commune with God and one another and, ultimately, share the gospel. I will highlight the centrality of language to all five predominant views of *imago Dei*. Finally, I will incorporate speech-act theory's assertions which outline how image bearers intentionally act upon one another through language in such a way as to affect and be affected by one another.

In chapter 4, I will argue that language is moral in nature and that humans, as moral agents, are responsible before God for how they use it—whether for his glory and according to his purposes or according to their own motives and will. I will ground linguistic morality in heart orientation, arguing righteous speech flows from a heart oriented toward God and others, whereas self-serving words flow from a heart oriented away from God toward self. Additionally, I will identify moral norms by which we distinguish between moral and immoral behavior, and by extension, between moral and immoral uses of language.

In chapter 5, I will argue that language is covenantal in nature and that its proper use is integral to forming and sustaining the marital covenant. Beginning with the eternal covenant of redemption, I will explore the major biblical covenants of the Scripture. Next, I will discuss the inextricable link between language and covenant, noting that through language covenants are formed and sustained. I will then turn my focus to marriage as the primary human covenant and emphasize the role of language in forming and sustaining the covenantal bond. Finally, I will examine the marital covenant

in terms of missional complementarity and highlight the role of language in displaying the covenantal union between Christ and the church.

In chapter 6, I will argue that one's misuse of language as a force of violence against his spouse rather than a vehicle of love represents violation against God, the dignity and personhood of his spouse, God's moral law, and the substance of the marital covenant. I will also assert that such verbal violence can levy detrimental effects on both the soul and body of the spouse. I will present biblical passages that describe words as instruments of violence before discussing theological, anthropological, moral, and covenantal implications. I will provide a theological-anthropological-moral-covenantal (TAMC) framework for conceptualizing verbal spousal oppression. Additionally, I will offer an "anatomy of verbal oppression," adapting speech-act theory to propose five primary illocutionary functions of oppressive human utterances. I will then discuss potential effects on the soul and body of the spouse.

In chapter 7, I will synthesize the arguments presented in the preceding chapters to provide a general framework for assessing verbal oppression in marriage and suggest implications for counseling. I will propose seven factors counselors and ministry leaders should consider in discerning when sinful speech crosses the threshold of being oppressive speech. Next, I will offer guidelines for counseling individuals who verbally oppress their spouses, using an adapted TAMC framework. I will offer a similar framework through which to counsel individuals who suffer verbal spousal oppression. Additionally, I will provide two tools counselors and ministry leaders can use in order to identify and address verbal oppression in marriage.

In chapter 8, I will conclude my dissertation by summarizing the preceding seven chapters.

Summary of Research

The biblical counseling field offers few academic resources specifically

directed toward verbal oppression. Primarily, I encounter and interact with works written by scholars and leaders in the field that either address sinful language on a broader scale or domestic abuse in general. While not specific to verbal oppression, these resources contribute to my project. Additionally, resources pertaining to the theology of language have contributed significantly to the development of my argument. Whereas existing literature relevant to verbal oppression focuses on distorted and destructive uses of language, literature examining the theology of language emphasizes the nature and use of language as designed and intended by God. Both topics merit attention in understanding verbal oppression from a theological perspective.

Verbal Oppression

An array of helpful books and articles devoted to the subject of abuse and oppression have begun to emerge from the biblical counseling field. However, references to verbal oppression typically occupy small sections or are categorized under different labels. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that abusive language is pervasively woven together with other forms of abuse and oppression. It occurs concomitantly with spiritual abuse and usually with physical abuse. In other resources, oppressive speech is lumped together with other forms of sinful speech with no mention of abuse or oppression. Paul David Tripp's *War of Words* offers practical wisdom for overcoming a variety of sinful speech patterns.[10] He contrasts God's use of speech with Satan's and helps illuminate the heart-level roots of sinful language. In *Taming the Tongue*, Jeff Robinson draws from Proverbs, Matthew 12, James 3, and other key scriptural passages to offer practical advice for applying the gospel to speech.[11] Tripp's and Robinson's books are both accessible to a lay audience and beneficial in the biblical counseling sphere. However,

[10] Paul David Tripp, *War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles*, Resources for Changing Lives (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 3–32.

[11] See Jeff Robinson Sr., *Taming the Tongue: How the Gospel Transforms Our Talk* (Austin, TX: The Gospel Coalition, 2021).

both are written to address speech on a broader practical scale but a shallower theological scale than will be covered in this dissertation. Neither is written specifically to address verbal oppression within or outside of marriage.

Within the biblical counseling field, several works have been published in recent years dealing more broadly with the subject of spousal oppression. Darby Strickland addresses five primary forms of spousal oppression and includes verbal forms of oppression under the categorical heading of emotional abuse in her book, *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims*.[12] Strickland offers a particularly helpful list of verbally oppressive acts which she lists in order of severity, beginning with the least severe and concluding with the most severe.[13] Jeremy Pierre and Greg Wilson, likewise, offer a helpful resource for recognizing and responding to domestic abuse.[14] Although they give little specific attention to verbal abuse, they highlight prevalent dynamics at work in verbal abuse—such as, the "manipulative intent and behavioral forcefulness" of the oppressor, and the "diminishing effect" of the abuse on the other.[15]

From a broader Christian perspective, Leslie Vernick also discusses verbal oppression in terms of "emotional abuse." Vernick provides a helpful quiz for assessing the pervasiveness of emotional abuse in marriage, with most items involving speech.[16] Unlike Strickland, Pierre, and Wilson, Vernick writes primarily for the abuse sufferer. While the author offers helpful insights, Vernick falls short of a biblical paradigm of the root sins present in such oppression. For example, she argues that unrealistic

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[12] Strickland, *Is It Abuse,* 177–203.

[13] Strickland, *Is It Abuse*, 192–93.

[14] Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*.

[15] Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 39–40.

[16] Leslie Vernick, *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage: How to Find Your Voice and Reclaim Your Hope* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2013), 17–24.

expectations, entitlement, and the belief of lies lead to such abuse.[17] Scripture digs much deeper into the heart, citing passions, covetousness, and murderous idolatry (Jas 4:1–4). Additionally, Vernick fails to recognize or address the hideous and evil nature of verbal oppression (see chapter 6 of this dissertation). That said, Vernick's assertions regarding retained agency of the sufferer offer hope, reminding the sufferer that even in perceived powerlessness and helplessness, she can choose to grow in Christlike character. While this popular level book lacks academic depth, Vernick's contribution to the conversation on verbal oppression is helpful and valuable to the conversation.

From the secular community, Patricia Evans offers a prolific array of popular level books on verbal abuse. Although her work is disconnected from a biblical framework, the "interpersonal communications specialist" offers insight regarding misuses of power inherent to many cases of verbal abuse and elements of intention and control underlying verbal abuse.[18] Evans recognizes in language a power to either nourish or kill the spirit, wittingly or unwittingly echoing Proverbs 18:21.[19] She argues verbal oppression represents a misuse not just of language but of the power (or, one might argue, a capacity) inherent to language.[20] Evans also discusses the ways in which many victims of verbal oppression come to doubt their own perceptions. However, the author's disconnection from a biblical understanding of God, man, sin, and redemption leads her to reject not only sinful domination, which should be rejected, but any hierarchal structure of headship or authority at all.[21] Ultimately, I will not interact with Evans in this dissertation since my assertions rest inextricably on a biblical paradigm. She merits

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[17] Vernick, *Emotionally Destructive Marriage*, 199.

[18] See Patricia Evans, *The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize It and How to Respond*, 3rd ed. (New York: Adams Media, 2010). See also Patricia Evans, *Controlling People: How to Recognize, Understand, and Deal with People Who Try to Control You* (New York: Adams Media, 2002).

[19] Evans, *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, 27.

[20] Evans, *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, 27.

[21] Evans, *Controlling People*, 50.

mention since she has written more books on the topic of verbal abuse than any other author found in my survey.

Theology of Language

Recent decades have brought a surge of attention to the theology of language. John Frame drew me into the conversation by spotlighting the task of language development as part of the cultural mandate given to Adam in Genesis 1:28. He observes, "As God first spoke words to him, Adam is to speak those and similar words to his family and to impose upon the earth cultural institutions that observe God's standards and bring glory to him. To the extent that he does that, he speaks with God's authority."[22] Vern Poythress, who studied under Frame, contributes a remarkable and comprehensive theology of language. He views language as a gift God has given humanity as an "ectypal reflection of the Word," who is with God and is God, according to John 1:1.[23] Poythress draws a clear Creator-creature distinction, observing the accommodated nature in which God speaks truth to humanity that reflects "who he is in himself, in which the Word is the truth of God."[24] Newer to the conversation is Pierce Taylor Hibbs who argues that "because Christ never ceases to be the divine Word of the Father, language serves as the foundation of everything God does on earth."[25] Hibbs suggests all language leads to communion, and communion with God and others is its primary purpose.[26] Scott Oliphint, on the other hand, emphasizes the connection between language and covenant. Viewing covenant as the very purpose of language, he regards language as the means by which God gave "expression to [his] relationship with us, first of all, and then to our

[22] Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 789.

[23] Poythress, *Mystery of the Trinity*, 131.

[24] Poythress, *Mystery of the Trinity*, 130–31.

[25] Hibbs further asserts that language lies at the base of human behavior and identity. See Hibbs, *Speaking Trinity*, 6.

[26] Hibbs, *Speaking Trinity*, 85.

relationship to God and the world."[27] Together these authors connect language with God, communion, and covenant, all pertinent to the discussion of language and oppression in marriage.

To fully understand the powerful and destructive nature of verbal oppression, one must develop a theological perspective of language itself. In the next chapter, I will set forth the foundation of my thesis, arguing that the triune God is the origin and source of language and that this truth carries profound implications for how we must understand and discuss verbal spousal oppression.

[27] K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 119.

CHAPTER 2

LANGUAGE IS THEOLOGICAL IN NATURE

The premise of my dissertational thesis is that the triune God is the origin and source of language. This reality and its implications, therefore, must shape the ways in which the subject of language and its misuse in spousal oppression are understood and discussed within the theological academic community and the church. In this chapter, I shall support my premise first by surveying historical and contemporary literature affirming the Trinity as the origin and source of language. Second, I will discuss the distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, as understanding this distinction is essential to an accurate view of divine communication. Third, I will examine eternal divine communication—the unceasing intra-Trinitarian speech of God—which occurs within the immanent Trinity. Fourth, I will turn my focus to divine communication *ad extra,* God's use of language that occurs in relation to the created order. Fifth, I will briefly describe God's use of communication or language in terms of its corresponding nature, purpose, and functions, observing the identicalness of God's internal speech (*ad intra*) to his nature and the coherence of God's language outside of himself (*ad extra*) with his nature and will. Throughout, I will form this foundation for my thesis in accordance with Scripture and within a classical Christian model of Trinitarian theology.

Historical Support for the Trinity as the Source of Language

While there has been a renewed surge of interest in recognizing the link between human language and the Trinity in recent years, the early church also acknowledged the connection. The understanding that God speaks, however, reaches back to the first humans, Adam and Eve. In this section, I will present a survey of historic

and contemporary literature affirming the belief that the triune God is the origin and source of language. Additionally, because the evolution of the Christian understanding of the speaking triune God accompanies the evolution of understanding regarding the triune nature of God, I will present these two doctrines concurrently. In subsequent sections, I will describe divine communication *ad intra* and divine communication *ad extra* more fully.

Old Testament Affirmation: God Speaks

Scripture, possessing ultimate authority over all other sources of knowledge, reveals from its very first chapter that God speaks. Because God did not fully unveil his tri-personal nature to humans prior to the incarnation of Christ, God's speech was not in earliest times recognized as it is today—triune (though allusions to the Trinity exist even in the Old Testament, as will be seen in the upcoming discussion of Justin Martyr). The concept that *God* speaks, however, arrived as a foregone conclusion since the creation of the universe—the very first overflow of God within himself pouring outward toward all that is outside himself—begins with God speaking.

Moses reports ten instances in the first chapter of Genesis alone in which God "said" (*'āmar*), five in which he "called" (*qārā'*), and two in which he "blessed" (*bārak*).[1] As soon as God formed the first man, Adam, he spoke to him and established a covenant with him and with the woman, Eve, whom he made from the man's rib (Gen 1:27–28; 2:16–17). God created these humans with the ability to hear his words, to mentally interpret and comprehend his words, to respond to his words with words, and to use these same words to communicate with one another.

Throughout the Old Testament, God continued to speak to humans using human language. For example, he spoke to Noah (Gen 7:1–4; 8:15–19), Noah and his

[1] The term *'āmar* occurs in Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, and 29. The verb *qārā* is found in 1:5, 8, 10, and *bārak* is found in 1:22 and 1:28.

sons (Gen 9:1–17), Abram/Abraham (Gen 12:1–3, 7–9; 13:14–17; 15:1–21; 17:1–22; 18:1–33; 21:12–13; 22:1–2, 15–18), Sarah (Gen 18:15), Hagar (Gen 16:7–12; 21:17), Isaac (Gen 26:2–5), Jacob (28:13–15; 31:3; Gen 35:1, 9–12; 46:1–7), Job (Job 38–41), Samuel (1 Sam 3:4–14), Moses, Aaron, Elijah, and the other prophets.

Not only did God speak to his people, but he also spoke to his enemies and those outside the covenant. In the garden, he spoke directly to the serpent, who is understood to be Satan (Gen 3:14–15), and again to Satan about Job (Job 1:7–12; 2:2–6). He spoke to Cain after he killed his brother (Gen 4:6–15), to King Abimelech (Gen 20:3–7), and to the wicked prophet Balaam (Num 22:9–20, 32–35; 23:5, 16). Additionally, God directly spoke to and rebuked Job's friends (Job 41:7–8).

The Old Testament affirms that God spoke directly and indirectly to humans throughout that period of redemptive history. God would then become silent for a period of four hundred years before the New Testament would concur with that affirmation.

New Testament Affirmation:
The Trinity Speaks

Various individuals in the New Testament affirm that God spoke via human language throughout the Old Testament. Just before his martyrdom, Stephen gave a speech recounting instances in which God spoke to Abraham, then to Moses, then to Aaron, and also to the prophets whom he quotes (Acts 7:1–51). The author of Hebrews begins his epistle with the profession, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets," before enumerating Old Testament passages that point to Christ the Messiah (Gen 1:1–13). Jesus reveals in Luke's Gospel that he is the one written about "in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (24:44), all of which are understood to convey the words of God to his people. Further, in John's Gospel, we learn that the entire Old Testament speaks of Jesus (5:39).

In the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles reveal God's triune nature, after which the implications pertaining to language begin to take shape. In the Great

Commission passage of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus commands his followers to baptize new believers in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (28:19). Paul includes references to all three Persons of the Trinity in his blessing to the Corinthians (2 Cor 13:14).

It is the apostle John who most clearly unveils the crucial link between the Trinity and language when he connects the Son's divine pre-existence with his work in creation. John identifies Christ as the Word who was with God and was God in the beginning and the One through whom all things were made (John 1:1–2).[2] He is the Word in eternity and in creation. Because God created the universe by speaking words, this passage is vital to understanding the triune Godhead as the origin and source of language. The Father spoke, and the Son was the spoken Word through whom all things were made. When this passage is considered in connection with the Holy Spirit's presence indicated in Genesis 1:2, the Trinitarian nature of creation and language comes into focus.

Additionally, Paul instructs Timothy that all Scripture is God-breathed, illuminating the Holy Spirit's work in delivering God's words (2 Tim 3:16) directly to the human authors and therein to humankind (2 Pet 1:20–21). The creative-redemptive story was spoken by the Father, brought forth through the Son by the Spirit, and accommodated to humankind through the created vehicle of language.

Patristic Affirmation: The Trinity Speaks

Even though God unveiled his triune nature more fully in the New Testament and in the person and works of the incarnate Christ, the newborn church required growth and development in understanding the Trinity and needed to develop appropriate

[2] Jonathan I. Griffiths, *Hebrews and Divine Speech*, Library of New Testament Studies 507 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 129.

descriptive Trinitarian language.[3] The church's many years of wrestling with these concepts ultimately led to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381.[4]

According to Brandon Smith, the early church developed orthodox Trinitarian understanding and language through three phases: (1) Incipient Trinitarianism (AD 30–96), in which first-century Christians understood Christ to be Messiah and struggled to assimilate him and the Holy Spirit into a previously predominant monotheistic paradigm; (2) Proto-Trinitarianism (AD 96–325), when patristic writers began to contend with questions regarding ontology and economy and during which they began to understand Christ's dual nature; and, (3) Nicene-Constantinopolitan Trinitarianism (AD 325–381), during which orthodox credal Trinitarianism became fully systemized.[5]

While other voices of the patristic era were beneficial to the development of systematic orthodox Trinitarianism, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo contributed most significantly to our understanding of the triune nature of God's activity in creation, including that of language.[6] Each contributed his voice toward Trinitarian doctrinal development in opposition to contemporary threats against the church.[7]

First, Justin Martyr (AD 100–165) turns his attention toward the use of human language by all three Persons of the Godhead in the Old Testament. Performing

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[3] Here, I use the term "language" in reference to language that pertains *to* the Trinity, which itself had to be developed before it would be possible to discuss how language flows *from* the Trinity.

[4] Brandon D. Smith, "The Development of Trinitarian Language in the Early Church," *Criswell Theological Review* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 85.

[5] I present a very brief synopsis of Smith's taxonomy. For further study, see Smith, "Development of Trinitarian Language," 85–101.

[6] I owe credit to Glen Scrivener for his insights regarding the significance of Irenaeus's and Athanasius's works in relation to this study. See Glen Scrivener, "Creation and Salvation: Irenaeus and Athanasius," *Union Theology* (blog), accessed September 3, 2023, https://www.uniontheology.org/resources/doctrine/god/creation-and-salvation-irenaeus-and-athanasius.

[7] See Smith, "Development of Trinitarian Language," 100. See also Peter Widdecombe, "Athanasius and the Making of the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Doctores Ecclesiae* 6, no. 4 (November 1997): 456–78. See also Augustine, *Trin.* 45.3.4.

prosopological exegesis by way of grammatical analysis, he presents scriptural examples to support his argument that there are passages in the Old Testament in which the Father is speaking (e.g., Isa 1:3–4, 14; 58:6; 66:1), the Son is speaking (e.g., Isa 50:6; 65:2), or the Spirit is speaking (as a Spirit of prophecy declaring things yet to come, e.g., Isa 2:3).[8] Significant to this study are his contributions in (a) identifying all three persons of the Trinity in the Old Testament and (b) attributing to each the use of human language.

Irenaeus (AD 130–200) was the first patristic writer to recognize the divine work of the Son and Holy Spirit in creation. He writes, "For with [the Father] were always present the Word and Wisdom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things, to whom also He speaks, saying, 'Let us make man after our image and likeness.'"[9] He attributes God's work in the economy to the Son and the Spirit as his hands, Word and Wisdom.[10] In other words, Irenaeus places all three persons of the Godhead at the scene of creation, and there he also places language.[11]

Likewise, Athanasius (AD 295–373) recognizes the incarnate Christ's presence as the eternal Word at work in creation. He writes,

> The first fact that you must grasp is this: the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning. There is thus no inconsistency between creation and salvation for the One Father has employed the same Agent for both works, effecting the salvation of the world through the same Word who made it in the beginning.[12]

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[8] See Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 37–40 (*ANF*, 1:175–76). Michael Slusser analyzes the prosopological exegesis that several church fathers interpreted as indicative of the separate persons of the Trinity in the Old Testament. See Michael Slusser, "The Exegetical Roots of Trinitarian Theology," *Theological Studies* 49, no. 3 (September 1988): 461–76.

[9] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Haer*. 4.20.1 (*ANF* 3:487–88).

[10] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Haer*. 4.20.1 (*ANF* 3:487–88).

[11] Smith finds in Irenaeus's invocation of Genesis 1:26 evidence that he "was at least considering the prospect of the Son and Spirit having ontological and economic similarities. Athanasius will eventually provide the church with greater clarity. See Smith, "Development of Trinitarian Language," 93, 99.

[12] Athanasius of Alexandria, *Inc.* 1.

As with Irenaeus, Athanasius finds the incarnate Christ and the eternal Son to be one and the same.

Augustine contributed a great deal to our understanding of language by way of his doctrine of inseparable operations—the understanding that every divine act is a triune act with no person of the Trinity acting independently of the other two persons. This doctrine supports a triune understanding of language and the point that every divine Word spoken from the beginning of time has in some form involved all three persons of the Trinity. Centuries later, Bavinck would describe Augustine's doctrine of inseparable operations:

> All of the works of God *ad extra* have one single Author (principium), namely, God. But they come into being through the cooperation of the three persons, each of whom plays a special role and fulfills a special task, both in the works of creation and in those of redemption and sanctification. All things proceed from the Father, are accomplished by the Son, and are completed in the Holy Spirit.[13]

It is in the doctrine of inseparable operations that Augustine accounts for coherence between the distinct roles of Father, Son, and Spirit in the economy with divine simplicity.

Augustine's perspective of Trinitarian agency, Kyle Claunch argues, is ruled by two principles: "(1) The unity of the one God *ad intra* entails the inseparable operations of the three persons *ad extra*; (2) the distinction between the three persons *ad intra* entails a recognizable distinction between the operations of the three persons *ad extra*."[14] Claunch further clarifies the distinction between the *principle* of divine action and the *subject* of divine action in inseparable operations. He argues that the singular divine essence is always the principle of divine action, whereas the subject of divine action in the economy is either Father, Son, or Holy Spirit. This applies to divine speech

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[13] Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 319.

[14] Kyle Claunch, "What God Hath Done Together: Defending the Historic Doctrine of the Inseparable Operations of the Trinity," *JETS* 56, no. 4 (2013): 787.

in the economy as well. Jesus speaks what the Father commands him, the Holy Spirit speaks only what he hears, and it is the Holy Spirit who effects God's speech (John 12:49–50; 16:13; Acts 10:38), yet there is a singular divine principle.[15]

Together and in succession, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo build upon a scriptural foundation a case for the Trinity as the origin and source of all creation (which was spoken into existence *ex nihilo*). Therein, they affirm the Trinity as the origin and source of language.

Contemporary Affirmations:
The Trinity Speaks

Participating in the rise of interest in and discussion of the Trinity and language are several Reformed scholars, the most prominent of whom is likely Vern Poythress. Poythress invokes several scriptural passages that establish the Trinity as the origin and source of language: John 1:1, John 16:13–15, 17, Hebrews 2:10–18, and Hebrews 4:15.[16] He echoes the classical understanding that "God the Father is speaker, God the Son is the speech, and God the Spirit is the breath" and additionally argues that the creative words of Genesis 1 and all of Scripture "make manifest the wisdom of God that has its source in the eternal Word" who is the speech of the Father.[17]

In alignment with Poythress, John Frame also recognizes the Trinity as the source of language. Frame acknowledges a somewhat classical understanding of eternal

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[15] See Claunch, "What God Hath Done Together," 797.

[16] Vern Sheridan Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language, a God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 20–21.

[17] I cut off this direct quote with an ellipsis where Poythress continues the sentence with "carrying the speech to its destination. The Spirit is also the power who brings about its effects." It is in this phrasing that he moves from eternal divine communication to divine communication *ad extra* in a way that might confuse the reader. At times, Poythress's lines between eternal intra-Trinitarian communication and God's external use of language in general (intra- and extra-Trinitarian) seem blurred, such as seen in his perspective of John 17 as divine discourse that evidences language's eternal pre-existence to the created order. Nonetheless, Poythress's work is groundbreaking and of extreme benefit to the academic community's discussion of the Trinity and language. I rely on it significantly in later parts of this dissertation. See Poythress, *In the Beginning*, 19–21.

divine communication, arguing that God communicates himself eternally and that the Father is the speaker, the Son is the Word, and the Holy Spirit is the breath.[18] He argues that God's communication to creatures expresses his lordship, controlling power, meaningful authority, and personal presence.[19]

Pierce Taylor Hibbs likewise argues for the Trinity as the origin and source of language. Above all, Hibbs conceptualizes language as communion behavior, a communion that exists eternally within the triune Godhead and is the "burning core" of what it means for humans to be image-bearers.[20] "To study God," Hibbs opines, "is to delve into the communion he holds with himself and with us via linguistic revelation; to study language is to wade into the mystery of interpersonal communication that has its source in the Trinity."[21]

Kevin Vanhoozer observes the dialogical interaction between the Father and Son in John's Gospel to ascertain the nature of God's eternal being. He writes that these dialogues within the economy are characterized by mutual glorification, the giving of life, and the sharing of love. This perfect intra-Trinitarian communication, Vanhoozer adduces, is "God's doing than which nothing greater can be conceived corresponds to the

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[18] I use the phrase "somewhat" in light of Frame's argument of mutuality within eternal divine communication. Like classical theists, Frame views human language as a medium created for human accommodation and embraces the position that eternal intra-Trinitarian communication consists of God himself, unmediated by language. However, Frame argues that this communication proceeds from "Father to Son, Son to Father, both to the Spirit, and the Spirit to both." It is this mutuality that distinguishes Frame from a classical theistic position. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, A Theology of Lordship 4 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 48.

[19] Frame, *Doctrine of the Word*, 45–68.

[20] Hibbs characterizes the nature of eternal communion behavior as mutual glory and love. See Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *The Speaking Trinity and His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 24–29, 55–56.

[21] Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior: A Reformed Exposition of the Language Theory of Kenneth L. Pike* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2018), 3. Both Poythress and Hibbs build their theology of language on the tagmemic linguistic theory of Kenneth L. Pike, which Hibbs suggests "offers a picture of language that faithfully represents the incomprehensible Triune God of Scripture" (3). For a more in-depth discussion of Pike's theory as it pertains to the Trinity, see Hibbs, *The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior: A Reformed Exposition of the Language Theory of Kenneth L. Pike*.

perfect life that God is in himself as Father, Son, and Spirit," adding that "the three persons are distinct communicative agents that share a common communitive agency."[22]

Conceptualizing language as a created medium by which God reveals himself to humankind, contemporary classical theists such as Kyle Claunch support the understanding of the Trinity as the origin and source of language. Eternal communication consists of the processions from the Father to the Son and Father and Son to the Spirit, and external communication via language originates with the triune Godhead in the economy and extends to image bearers, who have been gifted the capacity to know and communicate with God through language.

Immanent versus Economic Trinity

Having presented historical and contemporary Reformed support of the Trinity as the origin and source of language, I will briefly explain the distinction between the immanent or ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity before addressing the associations and implications of each pertaining to communication and language.

Matthew Barrett defines the phrase *immanent Trinity* as who God is "internally, according to himself and in and of himself, apart from creation," versus the *economic Trinity*, which he describes as God's workings within the created order, his "*external* operations in creation, providence, and redemption."[23] Herman Bavinck argues that the latter flows from the former—from the eternal and immanent relations within the triune Godhead who, sufficient in himself and having no need whatsoever, chooses to work outside himself in creation.[24]

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[22] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, Studies in Christian Doctrine 18 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 244, 247.

[23] Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021), 112.

[24] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 332.

Readers looking solely to the writings of historic Reformed theologians may not readily discover such categorical verbiage as "immanent" and "economic." John Calvin does not explicitly describe categories using these terms, yet an examination of his writings reveals his assumption that the ontological Trinity is revealed through the workings of the Trinity in the economy.[25] For example, Calvin cautions those interpreting 1 Corinthians 11:3 that Paul speaks of Christ in his role as mediator, not Christ who is of one essence with the Father.[26]

Calvin bases his argument on the work of Augustine, who, also without using these categorical terms, argues that there is a difference in how we speak of the eternal God who is not subject to accident (immutable) and how we speak of him in relation to creation.[27] According to Augustine, "That which begins to be spoken of God in time, and which was not spoken of Him before, is manifestly spoken of Him relatively; yet not according to any accident of God, so that anything should have happened to Him, but clearly according to some accident of that, in respect to which God begins to be called something relatively."[28] Claunch agrees and emphasizes that the distinction between economic and immanent Trinity is not indicative of two separate Trinities but rather of the singular Trinity who has been historically understood in terms of *ad intra* (within himself, immanent) and *ad extra* (how he works and reveals himself outside of himself to creation).[29] Understanding this distinction is crucial to gaining a proper understanding of the triune Godhead as the source of language.

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[25] Seung-Goo Lee, "The Relationship between the Ontological Trinity and the Economic Trinity," *JRT* 3, no. 1 (2009): 93.

[26] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. and ed. John Pringle (1848; repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1996), 1:295.

[27] Augustine, *Trin*. 5.16.

[28] Augustine, *Trin*. 5.16.

[29] Kyle Claunch, "God Is the Head of Christ: Does 1 Corinthians 11:3 Ground Gender Complementarity in the Immanent Trinity?," in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction*

The Immanent Trinity and Eternal Intra-Trinitarian Communication

Classical theology embraces the Trinitarian doctrine that God is singular in essence and yet tripersonal—Father, Son, and Spirit. Bavinck remarks that the "entire Christian belief system, all of special revelation, stands or falls with the confession of God's Trinity. It is the core of the Christian faith, the root of all its dogmas, the basic content of the new covenant."[30] The three persons of the Godhead (*hypostases*) are of the same and singular divine essence (*homoousios*). Yet this triune God is simple in nature, not composite, and may not be broken down into parts.[31]

Any distinction between the three persons in the ontological sense is based upon relations of origin—the Father is unbegotten, the Son is eternally begotten by the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds by spiration from the Father and the Son. All three persons are equally, eternally one God. Augustine affirms this position and sets it within a historical orthodox context:

> All those Catholic expounders of the divine Scriptures, both Old and New, whom I have been able to read, who have written before me concerning the Trinity, Who is God, have purposed to teach, according to the Scriptures, this doctrine, that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit intimate a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality; and therefore that they are not three Gods, but one God: although the Father hath begotten the Son, and so He who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten by the Father, and so He who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but only the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, Himself also co-equal with the Father and the Son, and pertaining to the unity of the Trinity.[32]

Understanding this doctrine is foundational to understanding eternal divine communication. The one true God is an eternally communicative being, and the content of that communication is God himself. Augustine emphasizes, "For he speaks by the

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of Persons, and Implications for Life, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 78.

[30] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 332.

[31] Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I, q. 3, art. 7.

[32] Augustine, *Trin*. 1.4.

Word which he begat, not by the word which is uttered, and sounds, and passes away, but by the Word which was with God, and the Word was God . . . . He always and unchangeably utters Himself."[33]

The nature of God's eternal communication directly aligns with the distinction between the three persons of the Trinity—that of origin. Scott Swain describes the connection between the distinctions of origin and intra-Trinitarian communication, writing that the divine life is one of perfect communication and communion in which the "Father eternally communicates his life to the Son (John 5:26), who is his perfect Word, radiance, and image . . . . And the Father with the Son eternally communicates this self-same life to the Spirit, breathing him out in their perfect, mutual love and fellowship."[34] We can witness this perfect communication and communion, according to Swain, "because God graciously unveils it to us in the Gospel."[35]

What, then, is God's eternal communication? It is God himself—the Son, the eternal Word of God, ever communicated by the Father, with both communicating the same in their breath, the Spirit. Eternal divine communication simply *is* the eternal generation of the Son and eternal procession of the Spirit. The Father is not speaking *to* the Son and the Spirit, as can be misunderstood. Rather, the Father eternally speaks the Son, who is the Word, and from them proceeds the Spirit.

Kevin Vanhoozer describes eternal intra-Trinitarian communication as a ceaseless conversation and elaborates upon its nature as follows: "The inner-Trinitarian conversation that is God is perfect love: a communion of three communicants; the eternal delight of the dialogical dance of call, response, acknowledgement, and affirmation."[36]

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[33] Augustine, *Trin*. 7.1.

[34] Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 5.

[35] Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 5.

[36] Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 258–59.

Claunch offers clarification: "God is love essentially. The Father communicates his essence, which is love. The Son is the love communicated from the Father. The Father and the Son are each love because they are the same divine essence. . . . The Holy Spirit is the communicated love (essence) of the Father and the Son."[37] Pierce Taylor Hibbs adds the concept of glory to this description, noting that Jesus asked the Father to "glorify me with the glory I had before the foundation of the world" (John 17:5).[38]

The nature of divine eternal communication is the very essence of God communicated from the Father as the Son by the Spirit. Its function is self-glory, God glorying in himself in love and perfect communion. We do not speak of a purpose for divine eternal communication as we do with human language because the God who self-communicates eternally is "the real, the true being, the fullness of being, the sum total of all reality and perfection, the totality of being, from which all other being owes its existence."[39] There is nothing that he who *is* needs to become. He is the purpose for all that is, and there is no purpose outside of himself, for he is perfect.

The Economic Trinity and External Divine Communication

The term *economic Trinity* describes God's work within the created order, and his means of communication with creation involves human language. The nature, purpose, and functions of this divine communication *ad extra* align with his perfect nature and righteous love.

Economic Trinity

Whereas the ontological distinction between the three persons of the Trinity lies in relations of origin, the distinction within the economy is found in the missions.

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[37] Kyle Claunch, email message to author, August 17, 2023.

[38] Pierce Taylor Hibbs, interview by author, March 3, 2023.

[39] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 123.

The Father sent the Son to redeem, the Son was sent, and the Holy Spirit was poured out to sanctify.[40] These are historical events which happened in the fullness of time and in relation to God's creation yet which flow from the eternal relations of origin.[41] Swain notes that these missions serve as extensions in time of the eternal relations, originating in God and terminating on creatures.[42]

As mentioned, the immanent Trinity references who God is within himself through all eternity, nonrelative to his creation. The immanent Trinity remains a mystery to humankind, inaccessible due to our finitude and the Creator-creature distinction. However, we are able to learn something of the immanent Trinity by the workings of the economic Trinity.[43] We refer to this limitation as the incomprehensibility of God, but this does not mean that humans can know nothing of him. We can know God only as he has chosen to reveal himself by means of accommodation in the economy. We understand these works as *opera ad extra*, God's workings outside of himself.

Aquinas affirms the incomprehensibility of God, emphasizing that while God cannot be known perfectly, he can nonetheless be known.[44] He who is uncreated, argues Aquinas, simply may not be *fully* known by the created intellect.[45] Bavinck concurs with Aquinas and expounds upon his assertion poignantly:

> The distance between God and us is the gulf between the Infinite and the finite, between eternity and time, between being and becoming, between the All and the nothing. However little we know of God, even the faintest notion implies that he is a being who is infinitely exalted above every creature. While Holy Scripture affirms

[40] See Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 40. See also Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction*, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 103.

[41] Swain, *The Trinity*, 104.

[42] Swain, *The Trinity*, 104.

[43] Augustine recognizes the limited capacity of creatures to understand the eternal, immutable triune God apart from being "nourished by faith, and led by such ways as are more suited to our capacity, that we may be rendered apt and able to comprehend it." See Augustine, *Trin*. 1.1.

[44] Aquinas, *ST*, I, q. 12, art. 7.

[45] Aquinas, *ST*, I, q. 12, art. 7.

> this truth in the strongest terms, it nevertheless sets forth a doctrine of God that fully upholds his knowability.[46]

Josh Malone echoes both as he describes the paradox between our being "compelled by the Spirit" to joyfully attest to the "Father and Son having drawn us into familial fellowship by the power of the gospel" while being careful not to overexplain this God "who dwells in unapproachable light."[47]

It must be added that humans are able to see God and to know him to the extent that he has revealed himself *progressively* through his work in creation and redemption.[48] James Dolezal remarks, "We come to know Him and speak of Him as He reveals Himself through His mighty deeds and *words*, one after another in succession."[49] That is to say, we who live at this stage in redemptive history—possessing the complete canon of Scripture, living two thousand years following the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and having access to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit upon regeneration—know God more fully than those who lived during the period of Abraham because of God's successive redemptive works within the economy. Central to this revelation to humankind is God's accommodating himself to us using human language.

External Divine Communication

While we appreciate that God self-communicates *within* himself eternally, we also recognize that he speaks externally, outside himself in relation to the created order. Because God's external self-communication flows from his internal perfection, God's use

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[46] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 30.

[47] Josh Malone, "Eternal Generation: Pro-Nicene Pattern, Dogmatic Function, and Created Effects," in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 274.

[48] Aquinas, *ST*, I, q. 12, art. 8.

[49] James E. Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), chap. 5, "Eternal Creator," para. 1, Kindle (emphasis added).

of human language coheres with his perfect nature and reveals analogically his divine attributes.

Bavinck highlights Reformed theology's insistence that God transcends human imagination, comprehension, and language.[50] While he describes communication *ad intra* as "archetypal for God's work in creation," he emphasizes that humans are unable to access the mystery of God apart from revelation accommodated to human capacity and limitation.[51] This accommodation is language. Kevin Vanhoozer references this linguistic accommodation as "the 'speech-bridge' the infinite Creator traverses to communicate with finite creatures."[52] Language, therefore is the created medium by which God reveals himself to humankind.

The modes with which God has externally communicated himself to humans include direct speech (as covered previously in this chapter), Jesus the incarnate Son, and Scripture. Scripture is the means by which God speaks in human language today. In all cases, language is central to the salvific message and to the establishment of God's covenants with his people.

Purpose of Divine Communication Ad Extra

According to Poythress, a primary and overarching purpose of language is to serve as a medium of communication and communion between God and humans.[53] Frame notes that the divine voice, through human language, makes God's mind known to man.[54] Remarkably, the first recorded use of language is spoken not by humans but by

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[50] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 28.

[51] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 333.

[52] Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 192.

[53] Poythress, *In the Beginning*, 38.

[54] Frame, *Doctrine of the Word*, 84.

God, and from the creation of Adam, language is the means by which God has made himself and his will known to humans.

Language, as Hibbs argues, is communion behavior, which he defines in part as "an image-bearing behavior that has the goal of (a) drawing persons into fellowship with God and (b) drawing persons into fellowship with each other."[55] Therefore, Hibbs argues, each time God condescends to communicate with humans, he is in some sense drawing us nearer to him.[56]

Jonathan Edwards views the purpose of divine self-communication as being centered on God's own glory. He writes,

> God glorifies himself toward the creatures also two ways: (1) by appearing to them, being manifested to their understandings; (2) in communicating himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying the manifestations which he makes of himself. They both of them may be called his glory in the more extensive sense of the word, viz. his shining forth, or the going forth of his excellency, beauty and essential glory ad extra. By one way it goes forth towards their understanding; by the other it goes forth toward their will or their hearts.[57]

This glorification, then, entails both God's self-revelation to creatures and their responding to such glorious manifestation by understanding him more rightly and delighting in him.

Functions of Divine Communication Ad Extra

Unlike human words, all of God's words accomplish that which he purposes for them, and they do so in accordance with his perfect will.[58] Vanhoozer notes that "God

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[55] In the next chapter, I will discuss image bearing and its relationship to language more fully. See Hibbs, *Speaking Trinity*, 15.

[56] Hibbs, *Speaking Trinity*, 84.

[57] Jonathan Edwards, *The Miscellanies*, vol. 13 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 495.

[58] John Owen writes that God's words are "effectual and operative—namely his exerting his divine power with authority to accomplish his purpose in and through all things." See John Owen, *Hebrews*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 19.

uses words to create worlds, convey truth, console the poor and suffering, reconcile sinners, and judge justly."[59] Furthermore, through words, God blesses, curses, promises, and forms covenants.[60]

Creating

The first function of God's language, as discussed previously, is discovered in Genesis 1—a creative function.[61] Through words, God spoke all of creation into existence (Gen 1:1–3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26; Ps 33:6). One essential element of the Creator-creature distinction lies in the fact that only God can bring things into existence *ex nihilo* simply by speaking.[62] Bavinck affirms the church's historic position that God brought everything that exists "out of nonbeing into a being that is distinct from his own being" and that he did so through speech.[63] He expounds that God is not merely an "exemplary cause" but the "creating agent" whose word is "forceful and living [performative]."[64] He continues, "Therefore, the word that the Father utters at the creation and by which he calls the things out of nothingness into being, is also effective, for it is spoken in and through the Son."[65] This does not exclude the Spirit's role in creation. As Poythress points out, it is he who "carries the speech to its destination" and "brings about its effects."[66]

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[59] Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 206–7.

[60] I will expound upon the centrality of language to covenants in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

[61] This external divine communication does not indicate nor entail any change on God's part. He does not "become" Creator; he is eternal Creator, "perfect and indivisible" and not "subject to change, mutation, or movement." See Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, chap. 5.

[62] This is not to imply that only God can use language creatively but that only he can use words to create something from nothing. Humanity's ability to use words creatively will be covered in the next chapter.

[63] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 416.

[64] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 425.

[65] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 425.

[66] Poythress, *In the Beginning*, 21.

Moses reveals to us that *God said*, "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3). Suddenly, the internal communication of God is intentionally turned outward. He creates space and fills it with his presence through his Word. And most profoundly, with that very first external utterance—days before the divine deliberation to make humans in his image (Gen 1:26)—God created the language by which he would commune with his people. Oliver Davies notes that through this series of divine speech-acts, God manifested his divine creativity in such a way as to communicate his intimate presence within his creation.[67] He adds, "Out of the will of God to exercise intimacy in speech, the structured world is born, and the human race as the creatures who receive the divine speech, and who participate in it, are conceived."[68]

Sustaining

While creation was carried out in a historical time and place over the span of six days, there is an ongoing sense (not to be confused with an eternal sense) in which God still communicates externally to sustain all of creation. The writer of Hebrews reveals the Son's work in this: "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and the universe is held together by the word of his power" (Heb 1:3). The divinely-inspired author begins this verse by describing the Son in his pre-existence (within the immanent Trinity) and then moves on to his relationship to creation.[69] The apostle Paul also highlights the Son's sustaining work in his epistle to the Colossians, writing that he is "before all things, and by him all things are held together" (1:17). How does he hold all things together? According to Hebrews, he does so through the *word* of his power (Heb 1:3).

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[67] Oliver Davies, *The Creativity of God: World, Eucharist, Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 76–77.

[68] Davies, *Creativity of God*, 77.

[69] William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC 47A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 14.

Hibbs suggests that because God holds all things together, all of creation expresses in some way God's glory: "Everything that the Trinitarian God has made expresses the glory of the one who communes with himself. Every pebble, every strand of hair, every skin cell speaks. It speaks about its Triune, self-communicating Lord."[70] He therein affirms the song of David, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge" (Ps 19:1–2). In other words, all things God has created through speech and sustains through speech speak of his glory.

God's words are able to sustain, because unlike human words, God's words never pass away.[71] The prophet Isaiah writes, "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa 40:8). Likewise, Psalm 119:89 proclaims, "Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens." Jesus also reiterates this truth, saying, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Matt 24:35).

Revealing

To be clear, all of God's words are revelatory in nature. But what does God reveal through this use of human language? Paul David Tripp notes that God reveals his nature, purpose, and plans through words.[72] This God of all creation makes his infinite mind known to finite beings through the created medium of language.

God does not only speak to creatures using human language, but he also speaks externally *to himself* in human language as part of divine revelation. As has been noted by other scholars, the clearest example of this is Jesus's high priestly prayer (John 17:1–

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[70] Hibbs, *Speaking Trinity*, 34.

[71] I acknowledge that humans will give account before God for how they use or have used words (Matt 12:36), yet this truth does not mean that fallen words will stand forever as God's words do.

[72] Paul David Tripp, *War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles*, Resources for Changing Lives (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 8.

26).[73] In this passage, Jesus's disciples bear witness as he speaks to the Father, interceding for his current and future disciples in human language, simultaneously revealing to his hearers more information about his eternal divinity and unity with the Father. When Scripture presents examples of Jesus giving thanks (e.g., Matt 14:19 // Mark 6:4 // Luke 9:16 // John 6:11), it demonstrates intra-Trinitarian communication in which the Son incarnate reveals the Father of heavenly lights as the source of every good gift (Jas 1:17).

Davies divides New Testament examples of intra-Trinitarian communication in the economy into two groups of texts: the Father-to-Son affirmations that took place at Jesus's baptism and transfiguration and the Son-to-Father speech that took place in the Passion narrative.[74] The Synoptic Gospels report Trinitarian self-dialogue in which the Father expresses in human language his favor to Christ, the living Word, as the Holy Spirit descends upon him like a dove at his baptism (Matt 3:16 // Mark 1:10 // Luke 3:22). Likewise, the three Synoptic Gospels report the voice of God affirming Jesus as his Son and commanding the disciples to listen to him at the transfiguration (Matt 17:5 // Mark 9:8 // Luke 9:35). Matthew and Mark each report Jesus's cries to the Father on the cross, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*," or "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46 // Mark 15:34).[75]

Far more prominent in Scripture are examples of God's speech to humans for revelatory purposes. From Genesis to Revelation, God speaks indirectly and directly to people through human language at a particular point in redemptive history, and he

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[73] See, for example, Poythress, *In the Beginning*, 19.

[74] While the baptism and transfiguration are definitively Trinitarian events, the affirmations might be viewed as God speaking directly to the witnesses more so than to the Son. I agree with Davies more on the Passion plea as an example of intra-Trinitarian communication and am curious regarding his omission of the High Priestly Prayer of John 17. See Davies, *Creativity of God*, 85.

[75] The transliteration of Aramaic in Mark is presented as *Eloi* rather than *Eli.* Jesus's cries represent a partial realization of what he said to his disciples in Luke 24:44—that everything written about him in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. These words exhibit the fulfillment of Psalm 22:1.

continues to speak today through Scripture. Among the many examples that could be considered, God has spoken to humans in gardens, in the wilderness, from a burning bush, through a donkey, through prophets, and ultimately, through his Son, the radiance of his glory and exact imprint of his nature (Heb 1:3).

Through God's words, we learn of his nature in absolute terms (who he is eternally, nonrelative to creation) and relative terms (who he is in relation to the created order). For example, in Job 38–41, we encounter God's omnipotence when he reminds Job who laid the foundations of the earth, shut in the seas, and made the clouds its garment (38:4, 8–9). Through Job, we also learn of the omnipresence of him who enters the springs of the sea, walks the recesses of the deep, and observes the calving of the does (38:16; 39:1). We discover the sovereignty of the One who commands the eagle to mount up, who can do all that he wills, and who alone makes plans that cannot be thwarted (39:27; 42:1–2). We gaze at his wisdom on display in cosmic design (28:4–7; 39:15–20, 26). In other words, we capture a glimpse of the eternal nature of God through his drawing Job's attention, and ours, to his works around us.

Also, in the book of Job, aspects of God's nature in relation to creation are put on display. God makes clear that he creates and sustains all that exists. He reveals his compassion for creatures, great and small, as he conveys how he sees each one and cares for its needs. He demonstrates his justice in rebuking Job's friends (42:7–8) and his mercy, kindness, and compassion in restoring Job (42:10–16).

Additionally, God uses human language to exhibit who he is in relation to humankind, as well as who they are in relation to him, others, and the rest of creation. When he names Adam and then gives instructions to him, he identifies himself as Creator, King, and Lord. His kindness and goodness come into view as he, via language, establishes covenant relations with humans and tells them all he will give them and what is required of and forbidden to them.

Using language, God reveals his will to humankind. For example, after God creates and blesses Adam and Eve, he instructs them according to his will to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (1:28). In 1:29, they receive instruction about what God has given them to eat. In 2:16, God teaches Adam which trees' fruits he could consume and which tree was forbidden. From the creation of the very first man, God has spoken to humans through language and thereby made his will known.

As the author of life, God also uses words to convey truth and meaning. His authorship is inextricably tied to his authority. It is he who establishes truth and meaning and he who commands humans to trust his words. God's truths provide the interpretive lens through which his image bearers are to interpret themselves, their circumstances, and the world. Through language, God spoke to humans, revealing to them everything necessary to worship and serve him rightly. The fall of humankind happened because Adam and Eve trusted the words of another—the serpent—rather than trusting the word of their benevolent Creator.

Blessing/Promise or Curse/Warning

Additional functions of God's language found in Genesis and throughout Scripture are closely related: blessing/promise and curse/warning. Through language, God established a covenant with his people and spoke blessing and promise over those who would abide in covenant fellowship with him (e.g., Deut 30:16–16), and, conversely, curse/warning toward those who would choose self-rule (e.g., Deut 30:14–20). These speech acts are part of covenant language reiterated in the New Testament. John warns that "whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (3:36). Likewise, Paul pronounces a curse on anyone who has no love for the Lord (1 Cor 16:22).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I established the premise of my thesis, arguing that the triune God is the origin and source of language. This understanding and its implications should shape the ways in which the subject of language and its misuse are discussed and understood within the theological academic community and the church. First, I surveyed historical voices that affirm that God speaks (Old Testament affirmations) and that the Trinity speaks (New Testament affirmations, patristic affirmations, and Reformed contemporary affirmations). I considered the invaluable role that patristic fathers held in the development of classical Trinitarian theology: identifying as speaker all three persons of the Trinity in the Old Testament, recognizing the work of all three persons of the Trinity in creation, affirming the incarnate Christ as the one and same eternal Son and co-agent in creation, and illuminating the doctrine of inseparable operations.

Second, I presented examples of Reformed contemporary scholars who affirm the Trinity as the origin and source of language. I noted that each recognizes language as originating ultimately in the Trinity and views it as the primary means by which humans can know and commune with God.

Third, I distinguished between the immanent and economic Trinity, observing that the immanent or ontological Trinity refers to who God is eternally within himself, non-relative to the created order. I discussed the nature of internal divine communication, wherein the Father communicates his essence as the Word, his Son, and from both proceeds the Spirit. I stated that three persons of the Godhead commune eternally in light, love, and glory.

Fourth, I turned my focus to the economic Trinity, which describes God's workings within and relative to the created order. I argued that God uses human language to communicate in the economy externally to himself and, directly and indirectly, to humans. I noted that the three modes he has used are direct speech, Jesus the incarnate Son (the living Word), and Scripture, with Scripture being the remaining mode through

which God speaks to people today. I noted that God's words analogically reveal his perfect nature and work in accordance with his perfect will—which his words accomplish perfectly.

Fifth, I examined the functions of divine external communication according to God's creating works, his sustaining works, his revealing works, and his blessing/promising works for those who abide in covenant fellowship with him and cursing/warning for those who choose self-rule.

In the following chapter, I will examine the anthropological nature of language, exploring the relationship between image bearers and language and arguing that language is image-bearing behavior that is to be used according to God's purposes and for his glory.

CHAPTER 3

LANGUAGE IS ANTHROPOLOGICAL IN NATURE

In the previous chapter, I argued that the Triune God is ever self-communicating and that he is the origin and source of language. In this chapter, I will assert that because humans bear the divine image, God has gifted them with a linguistic capacity that carries the power to shape and be shaped by one another. To support my argument, I will first discuss what it means to be an image bearer, exploring the five predominant theories. Second, I will examine language as an image-bearing behavior, arguing that language is central to all five predominant views of what it means to bear God's image. I will emphasize that language empowers humanity to know and commune with God and one another and to exercise representational rule over creation. Third, I will discuss speech-act theory and embrace its premise that by speech, humans act upon and are acted upon by one another. Building upon the work of J. L. Austin and John Searle, I will conclude that by language, humans hold power to affect one another through speech in life-giving ways, but I will also note that because humans are fallen, they also hold the power to affect one another through speech in life-depleting ways.

Humanity: God's Image

Before God formed man from the dust, he 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 earth" (1:26). Scripture herein establishes that unlike

anything else in the created order, humans are the image of God, the *imago Dei*. As Herman Bavinck writes, "But among creatures, only man is the image of God, God's highest and richest self-revelation and consequently the head and crown of the whole creation, the *imago Dei* and the epitome of nature."[1] He observes that even pagan writers have understood humans in terms of "God's kin and offspring," a designation exclusive to humanity.[2]

While Reformed theologians generally agree on humanity's preeminent status above all other creatures, much debate exists regarding the precise meaning of the phrase *imago Dei*. An investigation into theoretical positions regarding the meaning brings to mind the idea of looking at an object through a prism and seeing particular facets of the object brilliantly illuminate as the prism is shifted under the light. While each aspect may helpfully describe the object in some way, not all will be useful in defining it. Scholars and theologians have defined *imago Dei* in terms of one recognizable facet or another pertaining to humanity, some of which are likewise more useful in describing the image than defining it.

In his recent dissertation, Jacob Percy summarizes five prevalent perspectives regarding the meaning of *imago Dei*: (1) a *functional* understanding which views image bearers as reflecting God's character and exercising dominion over creation; (2) a *relational* understanding, which centers on social capacities to relate with God and other persons; (3) a *substantive* understanding, in which one or more immaterial human qualities are believed to image God, such as that of reason; (4) a *teleological* understanding, which focuses on the ultimate goal of imaging God more fully; and (5) an

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[1] Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 531.

[2] Bavinck*, God and Creation,* 531.

ontological understanding, which considers the image of God to be the fundamental defining aspect of human existence.[3] I shall briefly discuss and critique each perspective.

Functional Understanding

Some scholars focus specifically on the functions of humanity as central to the concept of an image bearer. J. Richard Middleton, for example, understands *imago Dei* to be inextricably tied to the royal function of humans, stressing the connection between God's divine deliberation to make humans in his image with the stated purpose of exercising dominion.[4]

Also embracing a seeming functional perspective, Mark Cortez discusses the concept of *imago Dei* in terms of humanity's representational task. He expounds,

> First, the image of God is the task in which human persons serve as God's representatives by manifesting his presence in creation. Second, the image of God involves God creating and constituting humans as personal beings through whom he can manifest himself personally in creation. Third, the image of God involves the continual unfolding of God's personal being as he manifests himself in and through his covenantal relationships with his people, Israel and the church.

In this case, the image of God involves God manifesting his personal presence in creation through his covenantal relationships with human persons, whom he has constituted as personal beings to serve as his representatives in creation and to whom he remains faithful despite their sinful rejection of him.[5] Cortez embraces a cooperative functional perspective, but one primarily of divine action and only subsequently of human

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[3] Some scholars recognize overlap between these categories and embrace a blended view of two or more perspectives. Jacob Bradford Percy, "Male and Female, He Created Them: Gender in the Context of Human Embodiment" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023), 130. For further study of these five perspectives, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Dallas: Word Incorporated, 1987), 29–32.

[4] J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 54.

[5] Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 37.

function—God's manifestation of his "personal, covenantal presence in and through human persons" whose roles are to manifest his presence.[6]

At this point, I return to the analogy of looking at an object through a prism. When theorists who embrace a functional understanding view humans through a prism, the light they see most brilliant reflects from the facet involving human functions and roles. However, while God commanded humans to carry out certain functions and viceregent roles, Genesis 1:27 reveals their creation as image bearers precedes the functional roles. From their first breaths, Adam and Eve each bear God's image. God issues their mandate to be fruitful, multiply, fill, and subdue in the following verse. The first sentence of the divine deliberation is a complete one: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." What proceeds afterward is the conjunction "And" followed by delegated functions: "let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air." Whereas those who hold the functional perspective place emphasis on the second sentence, doing so is ultimately grammatically problematic. According to Cortez, these dominion functions should be viewed as consequential to being made in the image but distinct from the meaning of the image.[7]

If a couple were to bring a newborn daughter home from the hospital, friends would be perplexed if the couple were to introduce the baby as the keeper of her new bedroom or the one who will honor and care for them in their old age. Undoubtedly, those roles and functions might and should emerge, but their child is their child because she is their offspring, having been formed through their sexual union. She carries their name on her birth certificate and marks of their DNA in her body. They have been

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[6] Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 37.

[7] Marc Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 141.

delegated authority over her and will care for her, protect her, and choose the name by which she will be called. By God's good grace, they love her. Though she is completely helpless and utterly unable to serve them, to reason with them, or to return their affections, she is their image, a manifestation of their union together. This is not to diminish the importance of functional roles but instead to argue that these flow from the ontological reality and not vice versa.

Relational Understanding

Representing the relational perspective, Robert Jenson argues that the ability to relate and respond to God sets the image bearer apart from all other creatures.[8] Humanity is distinct, he suggests, in its having been personally addressed by God and enabled to respond to his moral word.[9] Kevin Vanhoozer offers a similar relational perspective invoking linguistic capacity. He argues that "what makes men and women 'like God' has to do with their being spoken to and their capacity to speak back."[10] To be God's image then, according to Vanhoozer, is to be a communicative agent in dialogical relation to God and others.

In addition, Karl Barth embraces a relational perspective with a twist. He equates the image not with individual identity but with human relationship, primarily between man and woman.[11] Because God is not solitary, Barth contends that it is the covenantal relationship with his helpmeet that makes the man like God and at last

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[8] Robert W. Jenson, *The Works of God,* vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 58.

[9] Jenson, *The Works of God*, 58–59.

[10] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 319.

[11] Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. 3 of *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 291.

complete. He is not the crown of creation until he is joined in covenantal union with the woman, a covenant Barth contends takes place when he chooses her as distinctly suitable for him, apart from all other creatures.[12]

While the relational perspective would seemingly add weight to my dissertation (especially the assertions of Jenson and Vanhoozer), it holds significant weakness. If the image is defined by the ability to relate and communicate with God, humans who become in some way incapable of communicating with and responding to God would in equal degree cease to image him. Similarly, Barth's position presents two conundrums. If the image is defined by the male-female relationship, then neither children nor single adults would image God fully but merely possess the potential to do so. Additionally, while animals also pair with one another as males and females, there is no place in Scripture in which they are said to share in bearing the divine image. Therefore, relational capacity should be considered contingent to the *imago Dei* rather than definitive of it.

Substantive Understanding

Theologians of the patristic era generally supported a substantive perspective which focused on structural faculties or capacities inherent to humans, primarily that of reason, but also extending to other faculties, such as spiritual, emotional, and moral capacities.[13] Augustine, for example, asserted that God's image is found in the mind, seeing a reflection of the Triune God in the triune features of memory, understanding, and love.[14] In a subsequent era, Thomas Aquinas similarly argues that "only in a rational

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[12] Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation,* 303.

[13] David Tarus, "*Imago Dei* in Christan Theology: The Various Approaches," *Online International Journal of Arts and Humanities* 5 (2016): 19.

[14] Augustine, *Trin*. 14.8.11.

creature do you find resemblance to God in the manner of an image."[15] To him, reason is central to personhood and the bearing of the image of God.[16]

Contemporary scholars Henry Morris and Arnold Ehlert echo the substantive understanding, arguing that the image "entails those aspects of human nature which are not shared by animals—attributes such as moral consciousness, the ability to think abstractly, an understanding of beauty and emotion, and above all, the capacity for worshiping and loving God."[17] They further attach the human body to the image, asserting that it empowers humans to do what God does without a body, such as see, hear, and speak. They thereby attach both physical capacities and mental, spiritual, and moral faculties to the image.

The problem with perspectives based upon capacities or faculties arises when one considers what happens to the image through the impairment of loss of those capacities or faculties. Should a human suffer as the result of an accident or disease in such a way as to lose the ability to reason, to communicate, or to think abstractly, for example, one could argue that he or she no longer retains the image, as could be argued if he or she lost sensory capacities. Additionally problematic regarding the corporal perspective is the fact that animals also possess the bodies that enable them to see, hear, and make sounds, yet Scripture does not ascribe the divine image to non-human creatures. For these reasons, faculties and capacities should be understood as entities that result from bearing God's image rather than defining what it means to bear it.

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[15] Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I, q. 93, art. 6, Kindle.

[16] For further study on the views of Aquinas and other patristic theologians embracing the substantive view of *imago Dei,* see Tarus, "*Imago Dei* in Christian Theology."

[17] Henry M. Morris and Arnold Ehlert, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 74, ProQuest.

Teleological Understanding

Some scholars conceptualize the *imago Dei* as something that materializes fully only through redemption and glorification. For example, Emil Brunner appeals to the New Testament in his teleological perspective of image bearing. According to Brunner, man "does not possess his true being in himself, but in God."[18] Such theologians suggest that the image is lost through sin at the fall and restored through faith in Jesus Christ, the true *imago Dei.* Joshua Farris describes the teleological perspective as follows: "Distinctively, humans are images at creation in seed form, but that seed is only developed by the redemptive water found in Christ."[19] In other words, the unregenerate human is an embryonic image and sentenced to remain so apart from redemption through faith in Christ. Therefore, the image is acquired through redemption and glorification. Bavinck, as another example, holds to a "whole-person" understanding of the *imago Dei* but argues that restoration of the image occurs only by regeneration.[20] He asserts that humans retained the image post-fall yet notes that certain faculties lost in the fall, such as knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, could only be regained in Christ.[21]

Arguments for the teleological view could be made based on terminology found in three of Paul's epistles (2 Cor 3:18, Eph 4:23–24; Col 3:10). However, Genesis 1 assigns humans the full and noncontingent status of image bearer upon their creation and at the creation stage of redemptive history. The image is marred but not lost in the garden at the fall. While Scripture does point toward a redemptive identity in which

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[18] Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, vol. 2 of *Dogmatics*, trans. Olive Wyon (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 60, ProQuest.

[19] Joshua R. Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology: Humans, Both Creaturely and Divine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 96, ProQuest.

[20] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 555.

[21] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 550.

God's elect are shaped increasingly into the image of Christ, the *imago Dei* deliberated in Genesis 1:26 and created in Genesis 1:27 is reiterated in Genesis 5:1–2 and Genesis 9:6, post-fall and millennia prior to Jesus's incarnation, death, and resurrection. The Old Testament affirms the dignity of humans as bearers of God's image, explicitly forbidding the taking of human life based upon the image (Gen 9:6). Unlike the pagan cultures of the time, this human dignity extends to even the lowliest and most vulnerable, including widows, orphans, and sojourners.

Ontological Understanding

Embracing an ontological perspective, Carmen Imes argues that humans *are* God's image rather than beings who *bear* God's image (the latter verbiage she rejects).[22] Imes contends that human embodiment is the only requirement for being God's image and that this comprises a human identity that cannot be lost or diminished. This identity, she suggests, carries implications for ethical behavior toward other human beings and for responsible care for creation.[23]Also affirming an ontological identity-focused perspective, Ryan Peterson views the image of God as human identity, arguing, "This particular creature is what it is because it is identified as God's image by God. The various powers and attributes belonging to humanity follow from God's determination that humanity will be God's image. 'Made in God's image,' then, is the identity of humanity."[24] For these theorists, the designation itself is the image.

Percy likewise supports an ontological perspective. He bases his conclusion in

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[22] Carmen Joy Imes, "Who Do You Say That I Am? Being God's Image in an Age of Expressive Individualism," Regent College, June 6, 2023, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RkcnMWPZWE, 8:50.

[23] Imes, "Who Do You Say That I Am?"

[24] Ryan S. Peterson, "The *Imago Dei* as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation" (PhD diss., Wheaton College, 2010), 69.

significant part on the work of Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum who argue that only this position aligns with Ancient Near Eastern context and a linguistic analysis of the term "image" appropriate to that era.[25] Gentry and Wellum concur with Imes's assertion that man *is* God's image, but argue further that an accurate understanding of *imago Dei* centers on *covenantal sonship* between man and God (implied by "likeness" in Gen 1:26) and *covenantal servant kingship* between man and the earth (implied by "image" in Gen 1:26).[26] Gentry, Wellum, and Percy assert that *imago Dei* is an ontological reality for humankind from which godlike human functions and capacities flow.

As is evident by my discussion on the other perspectives, the ontological position seems most compelling. This understanding captures the essence of *imago Dei* as understood in the ANE while recognizing that the image is not lost in the fall nor by disruptions or impairments of functions or capacities. The ontological position is irrevocably connected to human identity, regardless of the presence, absence, or impairment of functions, roles, faculties, relational connections, or capacities. Additionally, the ontological perspective maintains the divide between humans as image bearers, angels or demons (who exhibit some similar capacities and faculties), and other creatures who do not share the designation.

Whereas functions, roles, faculties, and capacities vital to human identity exist, these serve as outward expressions of the image without defining its essence. These are what Percy categorizes as accidental attributes, or "those attributes that an object could be without and still maintain its identity," or those which "are contingent to an object's

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[25] Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 186.

[26] Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant,* 186.

identity" without being necessary to it.[27] This is not to say that functional, substantive, relational, and teleological factors are not important aspects of personhood but only that the image is not lost if any (or all) of these is impaired. Divinely appointed roles, functions, faculties, and capacities are crucial to humans for fulfilling God's purposes for humanity. Humans are created, both male and female, in God's image and placed into the context of his creation to live in relationship with him and one another, to represent him to creation, to rule over and to subdue his creation, working to bring all things under submission to his authority.

Other Qualities of an Image Bearer

By God's design, humans are bipartite but unified and whole creatures made up of both material and immaterial elements that are interconnected in such a way as to experience, interpret, and respond to God, others, and the world around them in unison. In summary, humans are embodied souls or spirited bodies. Jeremy Pierre observes that "God designed the dynamic heart to function within a physical body—the immaterial and the material beautifully woven together so that the unseen spiritual activity correlates with observable physiological activity."[28] Materially speaking, each human body is composed of complexly interconnected cells, tissues, organs, and systems that physically empower people to visibly manifest God's presence in creation and fulfill the representative roles and functions contingent to the *imago Dei*. Without the body, the spirit would have no place to reside and no means by which to represent God to creation. Immaterially speaking, humans are also spirit. Their spirit (often referenced in Scripture

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[27] Percy, "Male and Female," 52.

[28] Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 112, Kindle.

as soul, heart, or other synonymous terms depending on what is being emphasized) is trifunctional, characterized by cognitive, affective, and volitional simultaneous operations through which people experience, interpret, and respond to God, others, and the world around them.[29] Attached to these embodied souls are capacities, or abilities, that are to be used in accordance with the roles and functions contingent to image-bearing.

Additionally, humans are gendered beings. Genesis 1:27 reveals that God created humankind in his own image, both male and female. Afterward, he looked at all he had made and beheld that it was "very good" (1:31). Both genders share common human capacities and properties and serve equally important roles in fulfilling the cultural mandate presented in Genesis 1:28.[30]

Because humans are God's image, they have been gifted with certain godlike capacities, as I have mentioned previously. They are divinely designed to use these capacities toward the functions and roles contingent to image bearing in ways that glorify God and benefit his creatures. Central to these capacities is a capacity to communicate through language. I will now turn my attention to the connection between image bearing and human capacities, subsequently narrowing my focus to human linguistic capacity.

Language as Image-Bearing Behavior

God has graciously gifted humans with a linguistic capacity for these image-bearing purposes: (1) that they may know God and commune with him; (2) that they may know and commune with one another; and (3) that they may exercise representational

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[29] For a full discussion on the various terms Scripture uses to describe human internal functions, see Jeremy Pierre, "'Trust in the Lord with All Your Heart': The Centrality of Faith in Christ to the Restoration of Human Functioning" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 67–77.

[30] Gregg R. Allison, *Embodied: Living as Whole People in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021), 49.

rule over creation, fulfilling their mandate to love God and others, thereby making God known and participating in bringing all things into alignment with his will (Gen 1:26–28; 2:15).[31] Ultimately, it is through language that the gospel is proclaimed (Rom 10:14–15), that individuals are added to the body of Christ by profession of faith (Rom 10:9–10, 13), and that the kingdom of Christ is expanded (Matt 28:19–20 // Mark 16:15).

Human beings are the only earthly species with which God has entered into conversation. In part, it is this ability to communicate via language that sets humans apart from other earthly creatures.[32] Friedrich Max Müller references language as "the one great barrier between brute and man," recognizing it as a divine gift that will never be acquired by animals.[33] Humans speak because they are created in the image of a speaking God. Abraham Kuyper emphasizes that language was created within Adam and Eve as part of the image of God. He adds, "With God, speaking is creating, and creating is speaking. And thus it could not be otherwise than that man also, having been created in the image of God, and to possess both the capability of speech and the language, in order to manifest the image of God in this way, by means of this language."[34] As Vanhoozer posits, God created in man "a being similar enough to himself to be able to speak back to him. Humans are communicative agents like God because God is the One who goes out of himself in communicative action . . . for the sake of entering into a dialogical relation

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[31] Emmanuel Ayee, "Human Communication Revisited—A Biblical Perspective," *Koers: Bulletin for Christian Scholarship* 78, no. 1 (2013): 10.

[32] Lydia Jaeger, "Models of the Fall Including a Historical Adam as Ancestor of All Humans: Scientific and Theological Constraints," *Science & Christian Belief* 29, no. 1 (April 2017): 24.

[33] Friedrich Max Müller, *The Science of Language: Founded on Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution in 1861 and 1863*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), 489.

[34] Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, vol. 1, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas, ed. Jordan D. Ballor and Stephen J. Grabill, Abraham Kuyper's Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 24.4, EBSCO.

with another."[35] Pierce Taylor Hibbs also recognizes the centrality of language to image bearing. He argues that human beings were "created *by the Word* in God's image—the image of the ultimate communicative being." Therefore, the *imago Dei* is inextricably linked to the Word who was in the beginning in John 1:1 and likewise communicative beings.[36] The ability to receive, interpret, and respond to the communicative messages of God and others via human language, therefore, is itself a divinely derived capacity inextricably linked to other capacities unique to image bearers.

Functional Aspects of Human Language

Language serves as a primary means by which humans carry out their representational role as image bearers and exercise dominion over creation under God's authority, fulfilling the creational mandate to multiply and fill the earth and subdue it (Gen 1:28). While Scripture clearly describes humans as having been created with the ability to hear, comprehend, and respond to language, their fulfilment of the cultural mandate also involved and continues to involve furthering language development. One sense in which humans use language to obey and fulfill the creational mandate is through their derivative creational capacity. While only God can speak things into existence *ex nihilo*, he has gifted humans with derivative creative capacities. Linguistically, this is displayed in the ability humans possess to combine a finite set of words into an infinite number of expressions to communicate ideas, thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions.[37]

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[35] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Human Being, Individual and Social," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 176–77.

[36] Pierce Taylor Hibbs, "What's in a Word? The Trinity," *Westminster Theological Journal* 83, no. 2 (2021): 341.

[37] The chasm between human and animal communication continues to puzzle evolutionary scientists and linguistic theorists. Noam Chomsky, for example, recognizes that humans alone possess the innate capacity to acquire language and to apply universal grammar toward combining a finite set of words into an infinite array of sentences. Heavily influenced by Charles Darwin, Chomsky looks to mutations

Adam's creative development of language was a central component to fulfilling the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28. John Frame recognizes Adam's linguistic capacity as a function of his derivative and analogous lordship—submitted to God's ultimate lordship—over creation according to three offices: a kingly office (control), a priestly office (presence), and a prophetic office (authority).[38] Frame explains,

> Adam's cultural task can be seen from a linguistic perspective: the work of developing a language analogous to the word of God himself, building throughout the world a culture in conformity with it. . . . As God first spoke words to him, Adam is to speak those and similar words to his family and to impose upon the earth cultural institutions that observe God's standards and bring glory to him. To the extent he does that, he speaks with God's authority.[39]

Language empowers humanity's ongoing functions as kings, prophets, and priests over creation. The creative use of language to fulfill the role of kingship is first displayed in Scripture when God tasks Adam with giving names to the living creatures he had made. Naming was a linguistic task that implied a position of authority and, thus, also an image-bearing behavior.[40] Therefore, when God commissioned Adam with the role of naming his creatures, he simultaneously delegated an important means by which humans would exercise reign and rule over creation.[41]

The centrality of language in humanity's exercise of kingship does not end with naming. Language is central to every means by which humanity exercises kingship

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rather than to the Creator as the causal factor for the human linguistic capacity. See Robert C. Berwick and Noam Chomsky, *Why Only Us: Language and Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), ProQuest.

[38] John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 784–91.

[39] Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 789.

[40] Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1:11–26*, New American Commentary 1A (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 215, Logos. See also Vern Sheridan Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language, a God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 30.

[41] Peter Paul Gesting III, "Breath of Life: A Biblical Understanding of the Human-Animal Distinction and a Critique of Contemporary Theological Anthropology" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022), 54.

over God's creation. In every way that humans use language to nurture and expand God's will within creation, they exercise kingship. When language is used in pursuit of justice against evil, it empowers and exemplifies humanity's delegated kingship. When it is used to diagnose and prescribe treatment for the sick or the injured, it does the same. Without language, humans could not function in their roles as covenantal kings over creation.

On a broader scale, language is crucial to the establishment of society and culture, as members shape and are shaped by one another through linguistic communication. It is through language that social values are defined and transmitted from generation to generation.[42] Mark Miller describes language as a community's accumulated and "primary means for making common its meaning."[43] Alessandro Duranti argues that language is a vehicle that serves not only to reproduce reality within a community but also to transform it. He writes, "It is through language that we make friends or enemies, exacerbate or try to solve conflict, learn about our society and try to either conform to it or change it."[44]

This power and importance of language to shape society into conformity with God's mind and will is reiterated in Deuteronomy when God establishes a covenant with Israel:

> Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise (6:4–7).

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[42] Jeremy Thompson and Wendy Widder, "Language in Use," in *Linguistics & Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Douglas Mangum and Josh Westbury, Lexham Methods Series 2 (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), chap. 3, sec. 3.2, para. 2a, EBSCO.

[43] Mark T. Miller, *The Quest for God & The Good Life: Lonergan's Theological Anthropology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 82.

[44] Alessandro Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42, ProQuest.

In this example, God uses Moses to convey to the Israelites via the created medium of language the commands and values they are to transmit from generation to generation to shape them as his chosen people distinct from all other people groups.

Conversely, Jesus demonstrates how language can be used to refine or expand already-established societal standards. For example, in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records Jesus repeatedly challenging socially transmitted standards of behavior in favor of God's higher standards of righteousness (e.g., moral standard finding guilt in anger of the heart rather than only for murder, or for lust of the eyes rather than only for adultery; Matt 5:21–28). Further, Jesus links the performing or ignoring of the law with teaching others to do the same (Matt 5:19). No fewer than six times, Jesus challenges socially accepted norms, using language to evoke a greater understanding of and deeper submission to God's desires.[45]

Similarly, language is necessary for humans to exercise their priestly roles over creation. John Frame sees in the linguistic aspect of the cultural mandate a call for Adam to carry out a priestly office by praying and worshiping God in every place and by leading others in worship, praying for them, and seeking God's blessings upon them.[46] Whenever intercession for others is undertaken, language is used in a priestly role. Examples of this usage in the Old Testament occur when Abraham intercedes for Sodom (Gen 18:22–33) and when Moses goes before the Lord to intercede on behalf of sinful Israel (Exod 32:30–32). The New Testament powerfully portrays such usage when Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34a).

In a similar vein, language is the vehicle by which God has used humans to

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[45] In addition to the previously cited examples, see also Jesus's statements of "But I say" in Matthew 5:31–47.

[46] Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 790–91.

serve as his mouthpiece to humankind. Within his prophetic role, Adam was to study and to further develop language as an analogical reflection of God's words. We can also assume that Adam functioned in this prophetic role when he conveyed to Eve God's instructions for living in the garden and his prohibition against eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam and all humanity require language to interpret, define, and explain the creatures and events surrounding them.[47] Moses is the first of the prophets in Scripture to convey God's words and will to the Hebrew people. To the extent that an image bearer uses human language to echo God's words to creation in an ambassadorial manner reflecting God's heart and will for them, he carries out his prophetic role.

Today, pastors, evangelists, missionaries, and everyday believers use language in a prophetic role when they proclaim God's words to the lost and warn them to repent of their sin and follow Christ. When they confront the lies of this world with truth from God's Word, they step into prophetic language. Paul speaks of his efforts to *persuade* others, imploring them on Christ's behalf to be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:11, 20). He describes himself and the apostles as God's ambassadors, with their appeal coming not from them but from God himself (5:20). To summarize this section, I conclude that language is central to humanity's ability to function in its representational role in relation to the created order.

Relational Aspects of Human Language

Language also serves as the primary means by which humanity relates to God and one another. It is one vehicle by which humans submit to the greatest

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[47] Paul David Tripp, *War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles*, Resources for Changing Lives (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 14.

commandments—to love the Lord their God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength and love their neighbors as themselves (Matt 22:37–39 // Mark 12:29–31 // Luke 10:27). Just as God glorifies himself, those who bear God's image are called to respond to God's words and works in ways that glorify him, including their use of language (Psalm 150:6). Through language, God's people pour out their hearts to him, ascribing praise to him, recounting his wondrous deeds, thanking him for his gifts, and blessing his name. Additionally, they express their hearts to him, confessing their sin and asking for mercy and grace in their time of need. In song and in prayer, humans draw near to the eternal God of the universe through human language.

This is not to imply that through language humans can perfectly ascribe praises or worship unto God. Augustine comments on the remarkability that the transcendent God accepts the feeble praises of men as follows: "And yet God, although nothing worthy of his greatness can be said of him, has condescended to accept the worship of men's mouths, and has desired us through the medium of our own words to rejoice in his praise."[48] The finitude of humanity in no way releases his responsibility to glorify God with its use of language.

Additionally, humans are empowered to commune with one another through the vehicle of language. People are social creatures, born into a network of relationships including human-divine, human-human, and human-nature.[49] Humanity is designed to flourish in the context of community, and such flourishing comes about in large part through language.[50] By God's design, humans come to know and be known by one

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[48] Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. J. F. Shaw (North Chelmsford, MA: Courier, 2012), bk. 1, ch. 6.

[49] Mark S. Medley, *Imago Trinitatis* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 43.

[50] Pierre, *Dynamic Heart*, 167.

another, as Paul Tripp argues, through conversation.[51] That conversation consists of human language, the most fundamental medium of social interaction.[52] It is an ever-personal vehicle that God has gifted to humanity to foster human connection and communion.[53] And there is no use of human language between persons that merely transfers information impersonally. Because language is communicated between persons, there is always an effect of bringing the persons closer together or further apart spiritually or cognitively.[54]

When Adam stood as the sole human in the garden, God declared that it was not good for him to be alone (Gen 2:18). Hibbs notes that this declaration bears witness to "Adam's inherent, image-made capacity to commune with other persons."[55] Therefore, God created Eve. Profoundly, the first recorded words of Adam erupted not in reference to the Creator God but to the creature, woman, whom God also endowed with the same linguistic capacity (Gen 3:2–5, 16–17). In kindness and wisdom, God created both the man and the woman with the ability to know and commune with him and one another through the means of language.[56]

Substantive Aspects of Human Language

According to Scripture, as soon as God created the first man, he spoke to him

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[51] Tripp, *War of Words*, 13.

[52] Laura M. Ahearn, *Living Language: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 30.

[53] Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *The Speaking Trinity and His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 13.

[54] Hibbs, *Speaking Trinity*, 12.

[55] Pierce Taylor Hibbs, "Imaging Communion: An Argument for God's Existence Based on Speech," *Westminster Theological Journal* 77, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 47.

[56] Tripp, *War of Words*, 13.

(Gen 1:28–30; 2:16–17). Adam, therefore, was created with the intellectual capacity to perceive, interpret, and respond to God's words.[57] Frame emphasizes intellectual acuity and linguistic ability as central to man's exercising his kingly, priestly, and prophetic offices and as "fundamental to human nature in the image of God."[58] Language is entwined with the intellectual capacity but not merely an intellectual capacity. Humankind's spiritual, emotional, and moral faculties, likewise, find their formation and expression largely through the vehicle of human language.

Teleological Aspects of Human Language

Language is integral not only to a person's *being* but also to his or her *becoming.* While the New Testament does nothing to diminish or minimize the Old Testament understanding of humanity as *imago Dei*, Christ brings the image into perfect focus. As Joshua Farris argues, "What it means to be truly or fully human is explained in Jesus Christ. . . . [B]y looking at Christ, we may see the human as God ideally intended."[59] Repeatedly, the New Testament calls humans to die to themselves and be made like him. Through union with him and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, the hearts of believers are transformed more and more into the image of Christ the incarnate Son. This process of sanctification changes both the nature of one's language and its direction. It makes sense, then, that since Jesus is God's eternally spoken Word made flesh, there is a teleological, Christological component to human language.

First, because human language flows directly from the heart, a believer's

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[57] I begin with Adam, as does Frame, simply because Scripture records God speaking to Adam first, giving him instructions before making Eve (Gen 2:15–17). Humankind, both male and female, share equal status as image bearers, as well as equal responsibilities in terms of carrying out the functions of their kingly, priestly, and prophetic offices. See Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 792.

[58] Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 787–90.

[59] Farris, *Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, 139.

words reveal a heart that is being made holy by the Spirit's indwelling and the transforming power of the Word (Ezek 36:26–27; John 17:17; 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:26). Whereas the believer's language formerly flowed from a heart oriented toward self, regeneration means that a believer's language flows from a heart oriented toward God. Sanctification means that the believer's language exhibits that reorientation increasingly over time. Additionally, the content of the believer's words becomes shaped by the promises of things yet to come, acknowledging what the Triune God has already accomplished through Christ and expressing confidence in what he has promised to do in the future. By these two dimensions of change, a believer's language becomes more sanctified and has sanctifying effects on other believers. Language is, therefore, both a mechanism by which one becomes something other and the means by which that becoming is evidenced.

Ontological Aspects of Human Language

Just as God's words flow from his perfect being, human language flows from the speaker's inner being. That being is often referred to in Scripture as the heart, though it is also referenced as the spirit, the soul, the mind, or other terms.[60] Image bearers are created with dynamic hearts that are designed to reflect God.[61] Were it not for the effects of original sin, the cognitive, affective, and volitional functions would work in unison to image God to creation and to worship him fully.[62] God's words reveal truths about his nature, will, and values; human language also serves as a primary means by which each

[60] For an exhaustive list of terms see Pierre, "Trust in the Lord," 27–28.

[61] Pierre, *Dynamic Heart*, 22.

[62] Pierre, *Dynamic Heart*, 24, 34.

image bearer's dynamic heart is displayed (Matt 12:34–35). Jeff Robinson observes language as the link between the inner heart and the outside world as follows:

> The heart *thinks*, and our words are the way those thoughts get communicated and transferred to God and others. The heart *desires*, and our words are the way we communicate what, how, why, when, and where we want the things that our hearts have come to desire. The heart *love*s, and every day the loves of our hearts get intentionally or unintentionally communicated to God and to those near us. The heart *worships*, and our words reveal what rules our hearts.[63]

While language does not reveal the heart exhaustively (Jer 17:9), one's words do reveal a great deal of the nature of the communicative agent in terms of cognition, affection, and volition.

Language as Cognitive Expression

According to Scripture, God exhaustively knows all the thoughts, ideas, assumptions, imaginings, and beliefs of every human, before we even form them on our tongues (Psalm 139:2, 4). Nonetheless, he beckons us to speak to him through human language, and he turns his ear toward us when we do so (Psalm 116:2). Even Jesus, God in human flesh, prayed to the Father using human language and taught his followers how to do so (Matt 6:5–14 // Luke 11:1–4; John 10:21–22; 17:1–26), though he and the Father are one (John 10:30, 38).

The primary means by which one human can come to know the cognitive processes of another human is through linguistic expression. Just as human language provides a major vehicle by which humans can interpret the realities and events that surround them, it empowers them to communicate their interpretations and responses to those. Through language, humans are likewise empowered to create ideas and narratives and to share those with others.

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[63] Jeff Robinson Sr., *Taming the Tongue: How the Gospel Transforms Our Talk* (Austin, TX: The Gospel Coalition, 2021), 11.

Language as Affective Expression

While much affect is communicated via vocal tone, facial expression, and body posture or movement, language nonetheless serves as an integral mechanism for affective expression. By carefully attending the words of another, the listener can begin to determine what that speaker values, desires, dislikes, abhors, or even covets. James conveys this when he contends that underneath the surface of quarreling and fights lie unmet passions, desires, and covetousness (4:1–2). Conversely, language directed toward the Lord's praises indicates a heart that values and treasures him.

Scripture presents blatant examples of how individuals' language usage conveys their deepest values. In First Samuel, Hannah's words reveal her heart's deepest longing, which is to have a son (1:11–16). In Psalm 145:2–3, David writes, "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable." These words reflect a heart that cherishes the Lord, while his words in Psalm 19:7–11 reveal the value he places on the Lord's words and ways.

Additionally, Scripture demonstrates how words manifest one's inner emotional experiences, perhaps most vividly in the Psalms. For example, David proclaims, "Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure" (Ps 16:9). The superscript of Psalm 102, on the other hand, identifies the author as "one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint against the Lord." This psalmist chooses to be known not by his name but by his affective state, which he conveys through language: "My heart is struck down like grass and has withered; I forget to eat my bread. Because of my loud groaning my bones cling to my flesh" (102:4–5). The psalmist's choice of words powerfully conveys his desperate inner turmoil. By observing his countenance, one who encountered him may have perhaps deduced that he appeared burdened. It is through words depicting vivid imagery, however, that the depth

of his affliction and the heaviness of his heart is made known.

Language as Volitional Expression

While the deepest motives of the heart are visible only to God (1 Cor 4:5), intentions and purposes become more visible to others through language. Sin has impacted humans in such a way as to disrupt accurate connection between linguistic expression and intentions of the heart.[64] However, to an extent, motives, intentions, and purposes do often become evident through language. One uses words to exert the will and chooses words according to heart motives. Through one's words, a person acts according to his desires and accomplishes effects upon the world around him. Paul recognizes words as action when he instructs the Colossians, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (3:17). An inference that can be made here is that language, like deeds, carries action—and not only this, but that action must be subservient to the nature and will of God.[65] A plethora of ways exist in which one's words may act, but they are ever volitional in nature. Even the mere act of making a statement is a performative act.[66] Therefore, speech must be examined as acts.

In conclusion, human language is specifically involved in the functional, relational, substantive, and teleological expressions of the image and the ontological definition of the image. Image-bearing linguistic capacity furthers God's purpose for humans to know and commune with him and each other while exercising representative

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[64] For example, when Herod instructed the wise men to search diligently and find Jesus and report back to him his whereabouts, his stated intention was that he, too, could go to Jesus and worship him. The angel of the Lord revealed to Joseph the true intention of Herod's heart, which was to destroy Jesus (Matt 2:8, 13).

[65] Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 291.

[66] Lace Marie Williams-Tinajero, *The Reshaped Mind: Searle, the Biblical Writers, and Christ's Blood*, Biblical Interpretation Series 104 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 8, EBSCO.

rule over creation.

Language as an Intra- and Inter-personal Change Agent

While God's words always accomplish exactly and perfectly that which he intends, man's words hold a derivative but analogical and imperfect power to accomplish effects through language (yet always subject to God's ultimate authority).[67] Language serves as a powerful mechanism by which people are affected and likewise effect change on the world and other persons around them. M. A. K. Halliday posits that human language "both construes and enacts."[68] He expounds, "It is not only a way of thinking about the world; it is also, at one and the same time, a way of acting upon the world—which means, of course, acting on the other people in it."[69] This is not a one-way process but rather an ongoing cyclical system in which individuals receive, interpret, and respond in some way to words and subsequently speak words that one or more others will receive and interpret and to which they will respond. In Halliday's words, language is a "conjunction of the experiential and interpersonal."[70] Every human utterance represents an act by which one effects or endeavors to effect change.

J. L. Austin offers three functional elements inherent to any human speech-act: locution, illocution, and perlocution.[71] The locutionary act entails the utterance of the

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[67] Anthony Thiselton cautions from Isa 55:10–11 that it is divine words that do not return void, not words in general. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *Promise and Prayer: The Biblical Writings in the Light of Speech-Act Theory* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 25.

[68] M. A. K. Halliday, *On Language and Linguistics*, vol. 3 of *Collected Works of M.A.K. Halliday*, ed. Jonathan J. Webster (New York: Continuum, 2003), 384.

[69] Halliday, *On Language and Linguistics*, 384.

[70] Halliday, *On Language and Linguistics*, 384.

[71] A thorough examination of language theory exceeds the scope of this dissertation. However, I will touch upon certain aspects of speech-act theory relevant to the arguments I present in this chapter.

word or words.[72] The illocutionary act involves what one performs in uttering, such as asserting, directing, or promising, and this involves force, while the perlocutionary aspect entails what is achieved by the utterance—the actual effects.[73] Such effects might be intended or accidental, but nonetheless they occur as a result of the speech-act. Below, I shall explain each of the three in detail and provide a scriptural example for analysis.

Locution: Human Utterance

Before any communicative interpretation takes place, an utterance is vocalized. A speaker utters sounds that must be received and rightly decoded by another for communication to be effective. Kevin Vanhoozer writes that this communicative action is "aimed at bringing about understanding . . . in order that speaker and hearer may freely coordinate their actions."[74] Such action, he adds, requires context for proper interpretation to take place.[75] Communication is precipitated by occasion, which is assessed as part of interpretation. A shared language and understanding of linguistic rules empower communicative effectiveness without ensuring it. A cooperative effort to the communicative process is presupposed.

Illocutionary Functions of Human Language

By God's design, humans shape and are shaped by one another through the vehicle of human language. Humans instinctively acquire language and quickly begin to

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[72] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 94.

[73] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 121.

[74] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 223.

[75] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 232.

understand it as a means of accomplishing action according to their desires. Therefore, linguistic communication must be understood and evaluated not simply according to its content but also by the intention (heart motive) of the communicator—what he or she desires to achieve.

Illocutionary functions involve the technical aspect of the speaker's intent. Austin distinguishes these speech acts according to five categories: (1) verdictives, or deliverances of a verdict or finding; (2) exercitives, or acts in which one uses authority, sway, or rights in giving a decision for or against a course of action; (3) commissives, or acts in which one issues a promise or vow to carry out a course of action in the future; (4) behabitives, or expressions of attitudes toward another's action, circumstance, or attitude, and (5) expositives, or expressed arguments, views, or clarification of views.[76]

While Austin originated speech-act theory, John Searle's modification and expansion of Austin's theory are widely recognized as advancement. I will briefly discuss his taxonomy below as grammatical, first-level functions.

(1) *Assertives*. Any locution that represents a belief or statement of fact is understood as an assertive. Because of the consequences of the fall on human cognition, one's beliefs may be accurate or flawed. An individual might make a true statement that he or she holds a belief, while the belief itself may be false. The entirety of Scripture represents an overarching set of assertives about God, humanity, creation, and the redemptive story.

(2) *Commissives*. Locutions that obligate the speaker to a specified course of action are referred to as commissives. Collaborative commissives entail obligation not only on the part of the speaker but also to a contingency of prerequisite action or

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[76] Jerrold Saddock, "Speech Acts," in *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 64, ProQuest.

condition on the part of the one with whom he communicates. “If you’ll go shopping, I will cook dinner” represents a collaborative commissive. Similarly, a warning, such as “If hit your brother again, I will ground you,” represents a collaborative commissive. Not all warnings exemplify commissives but only those in which the communicator obligates himself to a course of action if the receiver of the communication acts or fails to act in a specified way. “Get away from that tree or lightning might strike you!” signals a warning (and a directive) but not a commissive act. “Stop being late to work, or I will terminate your employment,” however, is a commissive speech-act.

(3) *Directives*. Utterances that issue commands or instructions are understood as directives. Commands denote a level of authority on the part of the communicator, though every individual uses directives in communicating to others. Examples of directives are commands (including both those that specify what one must do or refrain from doing), exhortations, warnings, admonishments, and questions.

(4) *Declaratives*. A declarative is an utterance intended to effect some change in status or circumstance upon its object. Some of the many examples of declaratives prominently found in Scripture are the functions of naming (e.g., Gen 2:23), blessing (e.g., Gen 2:3), adopting (e.g., Jer 30:22), justifying (e.g., Rom 5:1), and forgiving (e.g., Luke 5:20). Inherent to declaratives is one’s authority to make the declaration. Adam was delegated the authority to name the animals and birds; therefore, he declared how they would be identified (Gen 2:19). Jesus possessed the authority to declare a fig tree cursed (Matt 21:18–19). A national president holds the authority to declare a day of mourning, thus changing the status of that day from ordinary to peculiar.

(5) *Expressives.* Utterances that exhibit emotion are known as expressives. Contained within emotions, and thus expressives, are judgment (whether one views an object positive and beneficial or negative and unsuitable in relation to self) and value

(the level of importance one attaches to an object).[77] Common examples of expressives found in Scripture include lament (e.g., Ps 10), praise (e.g., 1 Chr 29:10–20), greeting (e.g., Phil 1:1–6), rebuke (e.g., Job 42:7–8), grumbling (e.g., Exod 14:11), and thanksgiving (e.g., Ps 136).

Perlocutionary Effects of Language

As previously noted, contained within every utterance of language is illocution—the intent of the speaker. The actual effects of human utterances upon their receivers are understood as perlocutionary effects. Often these effects align with the speaker's intention while at other times the effects may not.[78] For example, when a speaker utters an assertive, the hearer might (1) accept the assertive fully, therein incorporating it into his belief system; (2) accept the assertive in part while rejecting a portion of the assertive, incorporating it in part into his belief system; or (3) reject the assertive completely, reinforcing his own belief system. That change in cognitive stance entails an effect on the part of the recipient, even if the effect is a rejection of the assertive. One's pre-existing understanding and interpretation of surrounding circumstances and events may be dismissed, modified, or strengthened, influencing one's responses to people and events surrounding him. A similar set of possible responses result from a directive: a listener might reject a directive entirely or obey it fully or in part, in a timely manner or with delay. Nonetheless, there is action on the part of the listener, even if it is an act of dismissal. The speaker intends to provoke a course of action, but compliance rests solely in the will of the hearer.

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[77] J. Alasdair Groves and Winston T. Smith, *Untangling Emotions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 30, Kindle.

[78] John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 20, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173438.

Context and tone of voice also influence perlocutionary effects. For instance, "The kitchen is on fire!" is an utterance that could be technically categorized as an assertive but functions as a directive because the speaker presumes the hearer will stop what he or she is doing and take some type of responsive action. The same would not occur if someone uttered to the same listener, "There is a fire in Montana." This reality invokes affective and contextual factors at work in communication that exceed the scope of my dissertation. However, counselors and ministry leaders should be attentive to tone and context as they examine the ways individuals use language and the appropriateness of that use.

While the communicative agent does not control the perlocutionary effects of communication, Scripture holds the agent responsible for his or her intent and use of influence (Matt 12:36–37). Each person's linguistic capacity can be used in accordance with good or evil intent (James 3:1–12). Therefore, there is a moral component to language usage—a point I will argue in the next chapter.

To understand the three elements of speech-act theory, one can look at John 11 as an example. In verse 43, Jesus calls out in a loud voice, "*Lazaros, deuro exo*!" which means, "Lazarus, come out!" The speech-act itself consists of Jesus's utterance, specifically comprised of "Lazaros"—a symbol associated with a specific individual who has died, the verb *deuro* and adverb *exo*, symbols associated with specific action and location. Jesus's audience can interpret the linguistic meaning of Jesus's locution due to shared vocabulary and grammatical codes. Jesus's illocutionary act is that of a command with an intent to elicit Lazarus to be raised to life and come forth so that God would receive glory and honor and he also would be glorified (John 11:4). The perlocutionary effects of Jesus's utterance are threefold: (1) Lazarus is raised to life and emerges from the tomb (v. 44); (2) many of the Jews who witnessed this miracle believe in Jesus as

Messiah (v. 45), thus bringing glory unto God as he is also glorified; and (3) some of the Jews instead report him to the Pharisees who ultimately, along with the chief priests, call for his death (vv. 46–53), which accords with the fulfillment of Jesus's messianic mission through which he would ultimately be glorified. With the mere utterance of three words, Jesus accomplishes all of these effects.

Humans, as image bearers, have been similarly but derivatively endowed with a linguistic capacity that carries performative action. While few claim to possess the ability to call corpses out from tombs, Scripture affirms an analogical human capacity to speak in ways that potentially yield life-giving or life-depleting effects on the hearer (Prov 18:21). Words that echo God's words are life-giving while words that contradict God's words are life-depleting (the first examples of which are the serpent's words to Adam and Eve detailed in Genesis 3:2–5). Scripture reveals that those who are in Christ have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16) and his gospel has come to them in word and in power (1 Thess 1:5). Therefore, believers should be cognizant of the power at work in their words. God gifted them with language that is to be used, just as in the example of Jesus with Lazarus, for God's purposes, for his glory, and for the benefit of others (Col 3:17). The moral obligation to use words in life-giving ways will be discussed more fully in the following chapter.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I argued that language is anthropological in nature and is to be used by humanity for the glory of God, the good of others, and the benefit of creation. First, I discussed what it means for humans to be image bearers. I presented five prominent theories of the meaning of *imago Dei* and embraced the ontological perspective proposed by Gentry and Wellum, recognizing *imago Dei* in terms of

covenantal sonship and covenantal servant kingship. I recognized that theoretical overlaps exist and emphasized that while contingent qualities, capacities, and functions of *imago Dei* are important, the image remains even if those contingent elements are impaired. I briefly mentioned other qualities of image bearers, including their bipartite design, their gendered design, and their godlike capacities.

Second, I shifted my focus to language as image-bearing behavior. I discussed the purposes of language, stating that it is a gift from God to humanity so that we can know and commune with him, know and commune with one another, and exercise representational rule. I then related language's central role to all contingent aspects of image-bearing. I examined the centrality of language to humanity's functional role, beginning with Adam and the linguistic task presented to him in the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 and first evidenced in the naming task delegated to him in Genesis 2:19. I concurred with John Frame's assertion that language development was a central means by which Adam was to fulfill his roles as prophet, priest, and king. I argued that this linguistic obligation to use language in these ways continues today. I then discussed the centrality of language to humanity's capacity to relate with God and one another. I concurred with Pierce Taylor Hibbs that language is the primary vehicle God has given to humanity to foster human connection and communion. Next, I discussed the centrality of language to humanity's substantive capacities, including human reason, as well as spiritual, emotional, and moral faculties. I followed that discussion by arguing that language is central to the teleological human process of becoming. Language contributes to one's spiritual rebirth and formation and one's language is transformed by that inner transformation. Finally, I discussed the centrality of language to the human heart, serving as the agent of cognitive, affective, and volitional expression.

Third, I examined language as an agent of intra-and inter-personal change. Basing my assumptions on the work of J. L. Austin and John Searle, I embraced speech-act theory's premise that to speak is to act and that by speech, humans shape and are shaped by one another. I explained the three elements of speech-act theory: locution (the utterance itself), illocution (the speaker's intent behind the utterance), and perlocution (the effects of the speaker's utterance on the hearer). In terms of illocution, I linked scriptural examples to Searle's categories of assertives, commissives, directives, declaratives, and expressives. I then explored the example of Jesus's three-word command to Lazarus, "Lazarus, come out," to illustrate the three elements of the speech act—the words themselves (locution), Jesus's intent in speaking them (illocution), and the effects of his words (perlocution). I argued that humanity has likewise been endowed with a linguistic capacity that carries performative action and that we therefore have the ability to speak life-giving or life-depleting words. As Christ did, we should use our words according to God's purposes, for his glory, in alignment with his truth, and for the benefit of others. On that basis, I will turn my focus in the next chapter to the moral nature of language.

CHAPTER 4

LANGUAGE IS MORAL IN NATURE

In the previous chapter, I argued that language is anthropological in nature, stating it is an image-bearing capacity intended for God's glory according to his purposes, in alignment with the truths he has established, and for the benefit of his creatures—especially those who bear his image. Because God has gifted language exclusively to image bearers for the chief divine purpose of love that builds up, humans bear moral responsibility before their Creator for how they choose to use it—whether according to God's intended purpose and for his glory or according to their own motives and will. Every human utterance is a moral act, an exertion of one's linguistic capacity and personal influence upon people and the world, streaming in real-time from a heart inclined either toward God-worship and obedience, away from him toward personal autonomy and selfish ambition, or in some mixture of each.

In this chapter, I will argue that language is moral in nature and that humans, as speaking agents, are responsible before God not only for the content of their language but also for the purposes and functions for which language is used. First, I will discuss the two orientations of the human heart and the moral implications of heart orientation. Second, I will address moral normativity, identifying the divinely established norms against which human language should be evaluated. Third, I will examine scriptural passages that affirm human agency and responsibility regarding language and its associated power for carrying out good or evil. Fourth, I will argue that when humans use language in a manner contrary to God's purposes and design, they reflect the image not of God but of Satan, the enemy of every human soul.

While I will comment briefly on secular moral theory, I will not delve into an in-depth discussion or comparative analysis regarding various theories, as doing so would detract from the focus of my dissertation. Rather, I will develop my arguments based upon the assumptions that morality and ethics are rooted in God's moral perfection made manifest to us in his moral law imprinted on the human heart, the incarnation of the Son, and in the Scriptures. Moral reasoning and its application flow from hearts oriented toward God or away from him—that are subordinate to divine or autonomous rule.

Humans as Moral Beings

Since God is a morally righteous and perfect God, humans, as divine image bearers, are created as moral beings. Because their hearts were not yet corrupted by sin, Adam and Eve could worship God with their entire being. They were morally good—pure in thought, word, and deed. Their minds believed and accepted what God revealed to them as truth. Their affections were toward him, desiring and valuing that which he valued. In the words of Cornelius Van Til, they had "true knowledge, true righteousness, and true holiness."[1] The commitments of their hearts had not yet veered away from God. Genesis 1 and 2 reflect the original state of humanity before sin entered the world. God graciously gave Adam a suitable helper to rule over creation with him, and he delighted in her. Briefly, they could enjoy love, peace, and communion with God and harmony with one another and creation.

Antithesis emerged in the garden when the serpent enticed Adam and Eve to doubt the truth of God's words and the goodness of his character (Gen 3:1–5). When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, their rejection of God's authority and disbelief in God's words ushered in a spirit of apostasy in which their hearts and the hearts of all

[1] Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 34.

humankind became radically oriented away from God (Rom 5:12).[2] The effects of the fall permeated all of creation. The love and harmony humans previously enjoyed with God, one another, and creation gave way to enmity. In this fallen state, humans became unable *not* to sin and likewise unable to live morally perfect lives.

Nonetheless, all human beings hold moral agency to act in accordance with good or evil. As mentioned in chapter 3 of this dissertation, the functions of the heart are cognitive, affective, and volitional in nature. Everything a person believes, desires, and chooses displays the functions or operations of his or her heart. These three functions are constant, cooperative, and concurrent, and they are ever aimed in one of two directions: toward God or away from him.[3]

According to Reformed philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd, all humans post-fall are born with hearts oriented away from God and toward perceived autonomy and self-fulfillment (Eph 2:1–3). It is only through regeneration that the hearts of humans become oriented toward love and service toward God—and, by extension, toward genuine and virtuous love and service toward others. Dooyeweerd recognizes this antithesis as the religious root, or ground motive, which is the central driving force of every human heart, culture, and society. For those shaped by a biblical worldview, the religious ground motive is that of creation, fall, and redemption.[4]

Dooyeweerd grounds the religious root first in creation, emphasizing the impact of God's revelation of humanity's identity as the created bearers of the divine image. He writes,

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[2] Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, ed. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra, trans. John Kraay (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979), 30.

[3] John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 681–82.

[4] See Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 5, 9, 30.

> According to his creation order, Jehovah God is creaturely mirrored in the heart, soul, or spirit of man. This is the religious centre and spiritual root of man's temporal existence in all its aspects. Just as God is the origin of all created reality, so the whole of temporal existence was concentrated on that origin in the soul of man before the fall into sin. Therefore, in conformity with God's original plan, human life in all of its aspects and relations ought to be directed toward its absolute origin in a total self-surrender in the service of love to God and neighbour.[5]

Of all God's creatures, only his image bearers possess this religious root, directing everything that proceeds from the heart (emotions, beliefs, commitments, desires, values, choices, and so forth).

Because Adam, the federal head of humanity, chose sin, all humans are born with hearts oriented away from God and far from him (Rom 5:12). However, those who are redeemed through faith, though they struggle against sin, receive hearts that are oriented toward God and characterized by obedience (Ezek 36:26–27).[6] Scripture draws a distinction between these two orientations repeatedly. Those whose hearts are oriented away from God are called evil, wicked, or foolish (Pss 10:3–4; 14:1; Prov 24:19–20; John 8:44), while those whose hearts are oriented toward God are considered righteous and wise (Pss 84:5; 86:11; Prov 1:7; Rom 1:17; 1 John 2:29). The Holy Spirit works to sanctify those who are in Christ to transform them progressively into the image of Christ so that they will bear righteous fruit (John 15:5–8; Rom 8:9–13; 15:16; Phil 2:12–13; 1 Pet 1:2). In contrast, hearts oriented away from God remain characterized by increasing levels of rebellion (Rom 1:18–32).

This dichotomy between heart orientations as fountains of morality and immorality leads to a dilemma: what basis distinguishes moral from immoral behavior? By what standard is an action determined to flow from a righteous or unrighteous orientation? And who determines what standards of assessment should be considered? To

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[5] Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, 30.

[6] Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 130, Kindle.

answer these questions, we must turn to the matter of moral normativity as revealed in Scripture.

Moral Normativity

The debate regarding what constitutes good or evil has existed for nearly as long as humankind. Some evaluate morality and ethics based upon a utilitarian perspective, believing that which brings the most happiness to the greatest number is, therefore, good. Some argue that the goodness or evil of an act can be determined according to the consequences or benefits it elicits. Still, others argue that morality is established within cultures or societies according to their communally accepted values. However, as societal values and beliefs are ever shifting, no stable moral norms could be established under such a structure. Some look to natural law for moral normativity. Popular today in Western cultures, as was the custom in the book of Judges, is the notion that individuals have the freedom to act as their own moral authority, doing what is right in their own eyes and rejecting any externally imposed value system (Judg 17:6; 21:25). By this view, there would be not one but several billion conflicting standards of moral evaluation.[7]

In her article "Modern Moral Philosophy," G. E. M. Anscombe argues that for there to be a moral "ought" or obligation, there has to be a divine lawgiver.[8] Wayne Grudem concurs with Anscombe, adding that without this understanding, "we are left with just human observation, reason, and intuition, and there is no satisfactory way to prove that something is, in fact, morally right or wrong."[9] On the contrary, moral law is grounded in God's perfect moral nature. Scripture teaches that God is perfect in all his

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[7] For further discussion on secular moral theories, see Wayne A. Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 40–43.

[8] G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 6.

[9] Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 82.

ways (Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; Deut 32:4; 2 Sam 22:31; Pss 18:30; 25:8; 92:15; 119:68; Matt 5:48; 1 Pet 1:16). Because God is the sovereign Creator and humans are made in his image, we are responsible to obey him and to image his qualities (Eph 5:1; 1 Pet 1:15). He delights in his own goodness and is pleased with those who emulate it.[10] He is a holy God who has commanded his people to likewise be holy (Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:16). However, the eternal God is inaccessible to us apart from divine revelation. Humans would have no way to observe God's perfection had he not condescended and accommodated himself to us. He has revealed his perfect moral nature generally to humanity through the imprint of his moral law on the human heart and specially through the person and work of his incarnate Son Jesus and Scripture.

God's Moral Law Revealed in the Human Heart

As detailed in chapter 3, humanity is created in God's image. Therefore, God has imprinted upon the hearts of humankind a sense of discernment between good and evil. Van Til suggests that man was supernaturally created with "covenant consciousness" that envelops "creature consciousness," meaning that "Adam knew that as a creature of God it was natural and proper that he should keep the covenant that God had made with him."[11] Because God's law was and is written on the hearts of mankind supernaturally, all of humanity is morally responsible. Paul describes this to the Romans when he speaks of the Gentiles who by nature do what the law requires though they do not have it (2:14). He adds, "They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of

[10] Grudem, *Christian Ethics,* 78.

[11] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 113.

men by Christ Jesus" (2:15–16). Nonetheless, this form of general revelation is inadequate to lead to salvation through faith in Christ. Special revelation is necessary.

God's Moral Law Revealed in His Incarnate Son

The eternal, invisible God has not hidden himself from his creatures but has sent his Son to dwell among us as the image of the invisible God, the very radiance of his glory and the exact imprint of his nature (Col 1:15, 19; 2:9; Heb 1:3a). Jesus exemplified God's perfect moral character, living a sinless life before men. In all situations and with all persons he encountered, he acted in accordance with his divine nature, sinning neither by commission nor omission, even as he was fully human (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 7:26). Robert Jones observes that Jesus used words in five primary ways: (1) to refresh weary hearts (Matt 11:28–30); (2) to comfort grieving hearts (John 11:17–43; Luke 7:11–15); to humble proud hearts (Matt 16:22–23; 23:1–39; Mark 10:13–16, 17–31, 35–45; Rev 2–3); (4) to instruct ignorant hearts (Isa 9:6; 11:2; John 3:1–15; 4:1–26); and (5) to assure doubting or distressed hearts (Matt 12:18–20, citing Isa 42:1–3; Luke 4:17–22, citing Isa 61:1–3; John 14–16).[12] With the woman at the well in Samaria, Jesus presented a beautiful example of entering into her world, engaging with her, and speaking truth in such a loving and gracious way as to change everything about her life in this brief gospel encounter (John 4:30). In very different circumstances but with equal moral perfection, Jesus rebuked teachers of the law and Pharisees for their greedy and self-indulgent neglect of justice, mercy, and faithfulness they exhibited as they drew attention to their own perceived righteousness while impeding and burdening the faith of others (Matt 23:1–36). Language was central to his redemptive mission. His words revealed a heart oriented toward the Father and toward the people he came to save, yet against those who

[12] Robert D. Jones, *35100 Marriage and Family Course Teaching and Discussion Manual*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022), 105–6.

sought to oppress his people. In all circumstances, he was obedient to the Father, speaking only what the Father commanded him to speak (John 12:49).

Because Jesus willingly laid down his life to deliver sinners from the curse of sin and death, humans are called to turn from sin, trust him as Savior and Lord, and become like him (Rom 8:29–30; 2 Cor 5:21; Eph 4:17–5:21; Col 1:21–22; 3:5–16). The New Testament presents Christ as the perfect human model of the divine moral nature. New Testament scholar Sean Freyne asserts that the Pauline letters present conformity to Jesus's death and resurrection as the "goal of Christian moral living" and that the Gospels point to his life as their model.[13] Through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, God's elect become conformed to Christ's image (Rom 8:29; Gal 5:16–24; 1 Thess 5:23; Heb 10:14).

God's Moral Law Revealed in His Inerrant Word

Scripture is the means God designated by which people know God's law, understand their violation of it, and recognize their need for the promised Savior who is its fulfillment. Through the whole counsel of God revealed in both the Old and New Testaments, God's people learn everything necessary to know God, receive salvation through faith, and live a life of godliness (2 Tim 3:16–17). Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the biblical writers communicate descriptively and prescriptively to mankind God's ways as the path of flourishing and life, as well as revealing the outcome for those who remain in the path of rebellion and self-rule (Deut 30:15–20; Pss 12:6; 19:7–11; Prov 30:5). John Frame argues that because God has made his norms for human actions, attitudes, and beliefs clear and "comprehensible to all human faculties," humanity is

[13] Sean Freyne, "In Search of Identity: Narrativity, Discipleship and Moral Agency," in *Moral Language in the New Testament*, vol. 2, *The Interrelatedness of Language and Ethics in Early Christian Writings*, ed. Ruben Zimmerman, Jan G. van der Watt, and Susanne Luther, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2, Reihe 296 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 67–68.

obligated to appreciate and obey them.[14] Frame further asserts that God's speech, as revealed in Scripture, makes a "comprehensive demand on human life," as well as "many detailed demands," conveying God's will for man, individually and plurally, for all areas of life.[15]

For all humans alive today, Scripture is the means by which God's revelation of his character and will is accessible. Therefore, the first two norms discussed—God's perfect moral nature and Jesus, the perfect model of moral goodness—are presented to God's people today in the pages of Scripture. God reveals himself and gives commandments to his people in written words regarding how to live in accordance with his moral law.

It is important to note that God's commands to his people are not arbitrary or disconnected from his nature but rather flow from his perfect being.[16] For example, God is truth (Num 23:19); therefore, his people should walk in truth (Ps 86:11; 2 John 4; 3 John 1:4). God is love (1 John 4:8); therefore, his people are to love one another (John 13:34; 15:12, 17; 1 John 3:11, 23). God is the giver of life (Ps 36:9); therefore, his people are to value life and not commit murder (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17). God is compassionate and patient (Ps 145:8); therefore, his people are to exercise compassion and patience (Col 3:12). God is holy; therefore, his people are to be holy (Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:16). As God's people grow in their obedience to his commands, they better exhibit his character to creation.

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[14] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, A Theology of Lordship 4 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 408.

[15] Frame, *Doctrine of the Word*, 407, 409–10.

[16] Mark D. Linville, "Moral Particularism," in *God & Morality: Four Views*, ed. R. Keith Loftin, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 148.

Morality and Language

Because humans are moral beings and language is an image-bearing capacity given to them by God to be used for his glory and purposes, language and morality are inextricably linked to one another. In the words of Ruben Zimmerman and Susanne Luther, "Morality *requires* language."[17] Scott Oliphint highlights this connection, noting that upon creating the man and woman, God speaks to them in human language "in order that they might be obedient images that 'reflect' his character."[18] It is through language that God has made his will and the standards for human behavior known, and through language, these are passed on from one generation to the next.

People can choose to use language in ways that image God rightly, align with his revealed truth, and function according to his purposes, motivated by love for him and others; conversely, they can use language in such ways as to malign his image, contradict his revealed truth, and function in opposition to his purposes and design, disconnected from a love of God and others. Regarding this dichotomy, Jesus instructs, "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). The orientation of the heart directs the moral direction of one's use of language.

Characteristics of Morally Upright Language

As image bearers, God's people are responsible for using language in alignment with the nature, purpose, and design for which God intended it. Raymond Ortlund notes that in all human history, only Christ has done so with perfection. He writes, "[Jesus] never spoke an unguarded, self-indulgent word. . . . never spoke when

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[17] Ruben Zimmerman, "Moral Language in the New Testament: An Introduction," in Zimmerman, van der Watt, and Luther, *Moral Language in the New Testament*, 2:1 (emphasis mine).

[18] K. Scott Oliphint, "Covenant Model," in *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy*, ed. Paul M. Gould and Richard Davis, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 78.

silence was better, and every word he did speak was perfect."[19] His words imaged the perfect character of God, fulfilled the divine purpose for language, and aligned with the divine design of language. God's people, though imperfect, are called to do likewise according to the same three dimensions.

Morally Upright Speech Images God's Character to Creation

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul instructs the people, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (3:17). New Testament scholar Douglas Moo writes that obedience to this command does not entail simply uttering Jesus's name but instead acting "always in concert with the nature and character of our Lord."[20] In other words, the language that flows from the human heart is to manifest to creation the nature and character of the loving God whose image we also bear and the Son who did so perfectly. Through language, God's people should display his communicable attributes.

God is loving and good (Isa 63:7). Therefore, image bearers are responsible for using language in ways motivated by and expressive of their love for God and others, for the building up of others toward God's design for human flourishing.

God is truth (Isa 45:19). He has created language to function as the primary vehicle by which truth is conveyed.[21] Therefore, image bearers are responsible for using language that aligns with truth. To speak truth means to communicate messages that help hearers to understand God, others, themselves, and the world around them as God describes himself, others, themselves, and the world around them, valuing each of those

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[19] Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *Proverbs: Wisdom That Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 138.

[20] Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 291.

[21] Paul David Tripp, *War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles*, Resources for Changing Lives (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 8.

as God does. God's divine revelation given to us as Scripture provides the supreme epistemological lens through which all human ideas are assessed.

God is wisdom (Prov 2:6). Therefore, image bearers are obligated to use language that is characterized by wisdom rather than foolishness. In 1 Corinthians 13:11, Paul writes, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways." Solomon notes that "foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child" (Prov 22:15). It is unsurprising for children to utter foolishness, but the mature image bearer is to speak wisdom rather than folly (Prov 15:2). This entails more than expression of truths, but the application and use of those truths toward glorifying God and benefitting those who hear.

God is just (Ps 89:14). Therefore, image bearers are obligated to use language to uphold God's law, which he has established for the good of humanity, the protection of the vulnerable, and the rebuking and punishment of evildoers.

God is holy, righteous, and glorious (Lev 19:2; 1 Sam 2:2; Ps 145:17; Isa 42:8). Therefore, image bearers are responsible for speaking words that highlight his beauty and that of his handiwork (Phil 4:8). Vern Poythress notes that language allows the expression, transmission, and reflection of God's beauty, which is in some way reflected in all he has made.[22] The words God has given in the created Word of Scripture display his beauty and holiness, just as Jesus the eternal Word does so in human flesh.

God is gracious and merciful (Ps 145:8a; Eph 2:4). Therefore, image bearers are responsible for using words that convey grace and mercy to their hearers. Such words flow from hearts oriented toward God and others, giving grace to all who hear (Eph 4:29) and expressing mercy as they themselves have been promised mercy (Matt 5:7).

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[22] Vern Sheridan Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language, a God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 76.

Morally Upright Speech Adheres to God's Purposes for Human Language

Morally upright speech serves God's purpose for creating human language, that humans would grow and flourish in their covenantal relationships, empowered by love that builds up. Regarding the divine-human covenant, morally upright language glorifies God. It is a means by which humans commune with God, drawing near to him in obedient submission and intimacy. It blesses and pleases God (Ps 19:14). Regarding those in human covenantal relationships—in the church and in the home—morally upright speech empowers those who commune with God to also commune with one another, to truly know and be known by one another and to exhort one another toward deeper communion with God and greater hope in his gospel of salvation. Morally upright speech also works toward the fulfillment of one's duty to serve as a witness to the lost (Col 4:5–6), making God known to those who do not know him and inviting them to draw near to him through faith in the gospel of salvation.

Morally Upright Speech Functions According to God's Design for Language

God designed human language to function in ways that expand his kingdom in the created world. It begins with love toward God and extends outward as love toward neighbor. Scripture lists specific ways in which God's people use speech lovingly toward God and others. Some examples of morally upright functions of language found in Scripture include the following:

(1) *Praising and worshiping God*. The passages in Scripture that call us to worship the Lord and praise his name are too numerous to list. Psalm 96 calls us to "sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day" (vv. 1–2). Additionally, Psalm 99:9 says, "Exalt the Lord our God, and worship him at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy!" Hebrews 13:15 likens such praise to a continual sacrifice: "The fruit of lips that

acknowledge his name." Our words serve as a primary means by which our affections for the Lord are made manifest before him and the watching world.

(2) *Praying and interceding*. Prayer is presented throughout Scripture as the means by which God's people seek help from him, give thanks to him, lament to him, commune with him, and call upon his judgment against evil. His people are called to pray continually (1 Thess 5:17) in the Spirit (Eph 6:18) with thanksgiving (Phil 4:6; 1 Thess 5:18), casting all their cares and anxieties upon him (Phil 4:6–7; 1 Pet 5:7). Psalms is particularly filled with such prayers. Jesus, though also fully divine, modeled a life of dependence and prayer in his fully human state, and he taught his disciples to follow his example (Matt 6:9–13 // Luke 11:1–4). Believers are also called to intercede for one another in prayer. Paul instructed the Ephesians to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all of the Lord's people." Jones comments that in this passage, Paul's "four-fold use of 'all' . . . is striking. Believers are to pray (1) on all occasions, (2) with all kinds of prayer and requests, (3) at all times, and (4) for all believers."[23]

(3) *Uncovering and expanding human knowledge regarding God's creation.* When God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, subdue it, and exercise dominion over it in Genesis 1:28, he delegated to them the monumental task of pursuing and expanding upon knowledge regarding the design of his creation and how to care for it. This includes not only the material aspects of creation but the immaterial aspects as well. This pursuit and transmission of knowledge requires language.

(4) *Admonishing the idle* and *confronting/rebuking/correcting sin* (1 Thess 5:14). It is appropriate and good to verbally admonish those who are undisciplined and

[23] Robert David Jones, "A Biblical-Theological Study of the New Testament Church as God's Designed Agent and Setting for the Ministry of Mutual Christian Care" (ThD diss., University of South Africa, 2015), 207.

failing to step into their place and calling as believers, though this must be done from an attitude of humility and love (Eph 4:20, 25–32; Col 3:16–17; Jas 5:19–20). Those who are idle fail to step into spiritual responsibility and the fruit-bearing life to which believers are called within the body. Believers are called to confront or rebuke other believers who commit sin (Matt 18:15; Luke 17:3; Gal 6:1; 2 Tim 4:2). Paul exemplifies this when he rebukes Peter for separating himself from the Gentiles in the presence of the Judaizers (Gal 2:11–14) because he understood that the gospel was at stake (vv. 16–21). Unconfronted sin jeopardizes the soul of the sinner (Jas 5:20) and affects the entire church (1 Cor 12:26). The importance of loving confrontation cannot be overstated. As Robert Jones warns, "The Lord tasks leaders and members alike to keep watch over each member's soul. Failure to do so may result in spiritually fatal consequences for the church."[24]

(5) *Encouraging, exhorting, edifying, and building up one another toward faith and obedience*. In 1 Thessalonians 4:18 and 5:11, Paul instructs the believers in Thessalonica to encourage and build one another up. Similarly, the writer of Hebrews instructs believers to consider how to "stir one to love and good works . . . encouraging one another" (10:24–25). In both epistles, the instructions are given with the approaching Day of the Lord in mind (1 Thess 5:1–11; Heb 10:25). Believers are to encourage one another so that we do not lose hope. Paul contrasts corrupting speech with speech that "is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Eph 4:29).

(6) *Spreading the gospel of God's redemptive story.* Humanity's kingly representational role involves advancing the knowledge of God's Word to creation. Psalm 96:3 calls us to "declare God's glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples." Prior to his ascension, Jesus commanded his disciples to go and

[24] Jones, "A Biblical-Theological Study of the New Testament Church," 201.

make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything he had commanded them (Matt 28:19–20)—a command mentioned in all three remaining Gospels and in Acts (Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:44–47; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). Language exists first and foremost for this reason—that people can come to know and fellowship with God who created them for his glory, and that they can do the same with one another.

(7) *Comforting those who are hurting*. Because God comforts believers in their affliction, he calls on them to likewise comfort one another with the comfort they have received from him (2 Cor 1:3–4). Scripture presents suffering and persecution as a given (2 Cor 1:5; 2 Tim 3:12; Jas 1:2–4). Comforting sufferers biblically requires both presence and language. When we comfort, we function as God's ambassadors, reminding sufferers of his promises. Mark Seifrid comments,

> "Comfort" is help that speaks. It brings not merely outward relief but the knowledge that there is One who loves and cares, a God who sees distress and answers lament. Those who are in the midst of distress need something more than the external assistance that a mere technician might deliver. They need the warmth of compassion and concern, and they need it from the One who has power over all things, the ability to bring true help and deliverance.[25]

Seifrid adds that the comfort we communicate rests in God's fulfilled promise of Christ's resurrection, which reaches humanity in "the face of physical distress, failure of health, disability, illness, and weakness. . . . [covering] all human sins and failures."[26] This singular hope qualifies all believers to offer comfort to other believers suffering any affliction.

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[25] Mark A. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 21.

[26] Seifrid, *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 21.

Characteristics of Morally Corrupt Language

When humans fail to use language in ways that image God's character, adhere to his purpose for creating language, and/or align with his design for human language, their language is morally corrupt. Rather than glorifying God and blessing others, their language exhibits self-indulgence. Their words are fruitless and therefore idle, for which they will have to give account on the day of judgment (Matt 12:36). Their use of language does not reflect love for God or others. Their speech verbally violates God's standards according to three dimensions.

First, morally corrupt speech does not image God's character. Rather than displaying God's image, morally corrupt speech maligns his image by exhibiting man's sinful heart to creation instead. Such speech is neither motivated by love for God nor reflective of God's love and goodness (1 John 3:1, 11; 4:7–21; 2 John 5–6). Second, morally corrupt speech does not align with God's purposes for language. Rather than drawing the speaker near to God, morally corrupt language rejects God's authority and maintains distance between the speaker and God. His words deny the honor, obedience, and recognition due to God's name (Deut 6:5; Matt 22:37; Luke 10:27). Even in cases where words sound true and are true, their incongruence with the speaker's heart deems the speaker's use of the words disingenuous (Isa 29:13; Matt 15:7–9). Third, morally corrupt language violates covenantal relationships among God's people, both in the church and in the home.[27] Instead of building up in love and nurturing covenantal unity, the speaker's language tears down and creates distance between persons. In marriage, such language fails to exemplify the model of Christ and the church and his self-sacrificial love. Instead, language is used to present a fallen, distorted image. Regarding the creation covenant, morally corrupt speech propagates darkness rather than dispelling it by representing God to the world (Ps 119:130; Prov 4:19; Matt 5:16; Acts 13:47; Eph

[27] I will discuss this point in depth in the following chapter.

5:4–10; 6:12; 1 John 1:6). Such speech violates the cultural mandate given in Genesis 1:26–28 and the Great Commission presented in Matthew 28:19–20 and Mark 16:15–16. God even warned the prophet Ezekiel that if he refused to share God's warnings with the wicked, their blood would be required at his hand (Ezek 3:18–20). Third, morally corrupt speech functions in opposition to God's design for language. Morally corrupt speech preserves and propagates darkness and evil within creation rather than bringing it under submission to divine authority. It tears down rather than builds up. It disavows God's truths and/or presents falsehood as truth. It has a defiling effect rather than a beneficial and grace-giving effect on those who hear (Eph 4:29).

The following scriptural examples of language usage—devoid of love that builds up— represent morally corrupt speech.

(1) *Taking God's name in vain.* The common understanding of the prohibition against taking God's name in vain involves referring to God or using his name in an irreverent or careless manner. Bavinck expands this definition to include irreverence or thoughtlessness in prayer or worship and the misuse of Scripture for selfish gain.[28] Some scholars, such as Carmen Imes, suggest that taking God's name in vain involves living as the pagans despite having entered into a covenant relationship with God.[29] It is speaking and behaving in ways that fail to represent God as his people are called to represent him.

(2) *Murmuring/complaining*. While Scripture models and encourages lament, it condemns murmuring and complaining. Those who murmur and complain bring charges not against man but against God (Num 14:2–4, 11, 26–27). They fail to trust God's sovereignty and goodness and to remember his promises; rather, they, as creatures, accuse their Creator. God executes judgment against the Israelites who grumbled and

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[28] Herman Bavinck, *The Duties of the Christian Life*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Ethics*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 155.

[29] Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 68.

complained in the wilderness (Num 14:28–38). Jeff Robinson argues that this type of sin is rooted in covetousness and manifests in one valuing his own wisdom above God's wisdom.[30] In that manner, murmuring and complaining also involve a level of unbelief.

(3) *Enticing others to sin*. Just as Satan used language to persuade Adam and Eve to sin, humans also continue the pattern of provoking sin in others through their misuse of words. Solomon describes this: "With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him" (Prov 7:21). The apostle Paul notes that love does not delight in evil (1 Cor 13). The one who encourages another to do evil fails to love God and the person whom he entices. Scripture holds such persons morally accountable for sins committed at their behest, even while not absolving other parties of their own guilt in complying. God punished the serpent for his enticement of Adam and Eve, even as he levied consequences upon them (Gen 3:14–19). Additionally, God punishes most harshly those whose targets of persuasion are most vulnerable (Matt 18:6).

(4) *Mocking, ridiculing, or scorning others*. One who uses language to harm, humiliate, or ridicule others is known in Proverbs as a fool in the strongest sense of the word.[31] Because the objects of their scorn bear God's image, mockers are considered to mock God himself. In the book of Proverbs, mockers are presented as wicked and lacking wisdom (9:7–8). "He who belittles his neighbor lacks sense," Proverbs teaches, "but a man of understanding remains silent" (11:12). The mocker belittles in order to feel superior, setting himself up as the judge of human worth and denying God as the sole determinant of worth.[32]

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[30] Jeff Robinson Sr., *Taming the Tongue: How the Gospel Transforms Our Talk* (Austin, TX: The Gospel Coalition, 2021), 53.

[31] Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Proverbs*, How to Read Series (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 148.

[32] Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 17 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1964), 86–87.

(5) *Cursing others.* Cursing involves pronouncing severe or eternal judgment on another human for one's own purposes in a way that is strictly reserved for the sovereign, holy God. Herman Bavinck describes the curse as "an expression of sinful anger, hatred, and vindictiveness" that "appropriates God's omnipotence to serve human, sinful passions."[33]

(6) *Threatening, intimidating, or coercing others*. Asaph speaks of the arrogant and wicked who "scoff and speak with malice" and loftily "threaten oppression" (Ps 73:8). He concludes that the Lord will bring them under judgment: "How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors" (v. 19). God's commands are designed to promote flourishing and *shalom* among his people. Language that threatens, intimidates, or coerces others diminishes their agency and robs them of the flourishing and *shalom* God's commands are designed to preserve.

(7) *Discouraging others*. Paul instructs the believers of Thessalonica to "encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact [they] are doing" (1 Thess 5:11). God's people are to encourage one another to continue in the faith because the Day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night (5:2). That linguistic responsibility extends to believers today. To discourage others is to act in exact opposition to Paul's instruction, negatively impacting not only the hearer but also the church that is supposed to be built up as the hearer continues in the faith and serves.

(8) *Lying/deceiving*. John Murray defines a liar as someone who "affirms to be true what he knows or believes to be false or affirms to be false what he knows or believes to be true."[34] Grudem argues that lying is wrong because Scripture repeatedly forbids it and because doing so fails to image the God of truth.[35] Satan is understood as

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[33] Bavinck, *Duties of the Christian Life*, 154.

[34] John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1957), 146.

[35] Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 375.

the original liar (Gen 3:4–5) and is described as having no truth in him (John 8:44). When people use language to lie and deceive, they image not God but Satan himself, whom John refers to as the father of liars (8:44). Scripture repeatedly condemns those who lie (Pss 5:6; 63:11; 101:7b; Prov 12:19), and Ananias and his wife Sapphira paid the penalty of death for their lies (Acts 5:1–10). Revelation warns of the condemnation to the lake of fire and sulfur awaiting all liars, along with the sexually immoral, those who practice homosexuality, sorcerers, and idolaters (21:8).

(9) *Bearing false witness*. Bearing false witness is a form of lying that is particularly heinous in that it brings some form of consequence upon another. The serpent in Genesis 3 was the first to bear false witness. He bore false witness against God by accusing him of lying about the consequences of eating from the forbidden tree (vv. 4–5). His words distorted Eve's perception of God in such a way that she believed God to be deceptive and self-serving rather than righteous and generous. This is the nature of false witness. It leads others to wrongly judge the character of another—to bear false witness is to malign a good name, which Scripture upholds as being more precious than great riches (Prov 22:1). God forbids his people from bearing false witness against his or her neighbor on an immediate level to secure and protect the justice system in Israel.[36] However, as John Durham argues, the reputations of God's people mattered most significantly because of their functions as witnesses to the world.[37] Damaging the name of one's neighbor equates to maligning or extinguishing his important task as God's witness to creation.

(10) *Uttering obscene or vulgar words*. What constitutes vulgar or obscene language is generally determined by the societal population and situational context.[38] Grudem suggests that every language has three basic registers of classification for certain

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[36] Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 480.

[37] John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 297.

[38] Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 355.

terms: (1) polite or formal, (2) common, and (3) vulgar, obscene, or offensive.[39] Proverbs teaches that the righteous speak wisdom, knowing what is acceptable, but the wicked know and speak perversity (10:31–32). Kidner asserts that such perversity is twisted and opposed to what is wise or pleasant.[40] Scripture overlooks the subjective nature of vulgarity and commands believers to refrain from all such obscenity in addition to foolish talk, coarse joking, or corrupt speech (Eph 4:29; 5:4; Col 3:8).

(11) *Flattering others.* Flattery entails a manipulative and disingenuous compliment or commendation given to another for personal gain.[41] While on the surface, flattery may seem to benefit the hearer, the speaker's motive is self-serving. Flattery is a form of deceit because it ascribes insincere and unmerited praise. However, it goes beyond mere deceit because the speaker hopes to gain some form of benefit. Flattery can also have a corrupting effect by tempting the hearer toward sinful pride or toward acting in some way that would otherwise not have been chosen. Proverbs likens flattery to "spreading a net" for a person's feet (29:5).

(12) *Boasting.* Scripture condemns the practice of boasting, which involves ascribing glory to one's own capabilities, successes, possessions, or general being that belongs only to God. Proverbs 27:2 instructs the reader, "Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips." Paul makes it clear that the only thing humans can boast of is their weakness (2 Cor 12:9) and that we are to boast only in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31) and in the cross (Gal 6:14).

(13) *Gossiping and slandering*. Scripture categorizes gossip and slander as destructive evil and regards those who engage in these as unworthy of trust (Prov 11:13;

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[39] Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 354.

[40] Kidner, *Proverbs*, 85.

[41] Joseph M. Stowell, *The Weight of Your Words: Measuring the Impact of What You Say* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), 36.

20:19; 1 Tim 5:13). Grant Osborne observes that gossip is slander in whispered form.[42] According to Paul, those who engage in these sins "are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness" (Rom 1:29b). He also places these sins in the same category as quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, conceit, and disorder (2 Cor 12:20). Kidner observes that such persons are not merely indiscreet but malicious in intent. They deliberately expose others' secrets to hurt them.[43]

(14) *Criticizing, accusing, and blaming*. One of the most profound examples of accusation in Scripture is Zechariah's vision of Satan as he accuses Joshua the high priest before the Lord (3:1). In this vision, the Lord rebukes Satan harshly, referring to Joshua as a brand plucked from the fire (v. 2). Revelation 12:10 refers to Satan as "the accuser of our brothers . . . who accuses them day and night before our God." Those who use words to criticize, accuse, and blame others thus echo Satan. In fact, this sin can be traced back to the garden of Eden, where the serpent first accused and criticized God to the woman (Gen 3:2–5), where Adam first blamed the woman and even God (3:12), and where Eve blamed the serpent. Paul David Tripp notes that, ultimately, every accusation is against God.[44]

Language and Impact

One important moral aspect of language entails the profound and lasting impact words can have upon others. According to Robinson, human words move in either a life direction or a death direction. He writes, "If our words are moving in a life direction, they will be words of encouragement, hope, love, peace, unity, instruction, wisdom, and correction. But the death direction brings forth words of anger, malice,

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[42] Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, IVPNTC 6 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 56–57.

[43] Kidner, *Proverbs*, 87.

[44] Tripp, *War of Words*, 24.

slander, jealousy, gossip, division, contempt, racism, violence, judgment, and condemnation."[45]

Based in part on Proverbs 10:20–21 and 10:31–32, Robinson asserts that life-directed words flow from wisdom, whereas death-directed words flow from foolishness.[46] Kidner concurs and notes that words carry power in two directions: first, they penetrate the inner person of the hearer. Second, they carry power in their spread. Regarding penetration, he writes, "What is done to you is of little account beside what is done in you, and the latter may be for good or for ill. The feelings, or morale, may be lacerated by a cruel or clumsy thrust ('like the piercings of a sword,' 12:18a) . . . equally, they may be vitalized by a timely word (12:18b, 25), and the whole body with them."[47] In terms of spread, Kidner suggests that words act as seeds that bear fruit well after they are spoken: "A scoundrel's 'speech is like a scorching fire. A perverse man spreads strife' (16:27b, 28a, RSV). . . . So, too a good man will find his words bearing fruit both in the good that finds its way back to him (12:14), and in the benefits which reach out to many others, as from a 'fountain of life' (10:11; 18:4) and 'a tree of life' (15:4)."[48]

Moral infractions inherent to the use of language most often arise because of a human tendency to separate linguistic behavior from a biblical understanding of humanity as *imago Dei*. When a speaker hurls insults at another person, he fails to behold and honor the image of God in that person. His diminished understanding of human dignity liberates him to speak to another as though that person is a worthless object. Recognizing the implications of such sin requires examining the original concept of *imago Dei*. In the ANE, any action performed against a carved image of a deity was

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[45] Robinson, *Taming the Tongue*, 20.

[46] Robinson, *Taming the Tongue*, 22.

[47] Kidner, *Proverbs*, 43.

[48] Kidner, *Proverbs*, 43.

understood to be performed against the deity itself.[49] In other words, to blaspheme or dishonor the physical representation of the deity was equivalent to blaspheming or dishonoring the one whose likeness it bore. In the same way, to insult another person is to insult God because that person is created in God's image as his physical representation on earth. One cannot harm or bear hatred toward the image without, in a mysterious way, doing the same to the deity.

James applies this understanding of image and deity: "With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God" (3:9). James writes his letter to believers, not to unbelievers, addressing the incongruity between their professed worship and their treatment of others who bear God's image.[50] In the previous eight verses, James has presented vivid imagery to describe the tongue's deadly power to destroy. In verse 9, he reveals its true target: God himself. Those who curse other humans curse the "reflection of the divine."[51] According to Douglas Moo, such cursing would have been considered profoundly evil by James's contemporary readers because the curse was considered to hold great power. He observes, "The ancient curse . . . called on God, in effect, to cut a person off from any possible blessing and to consign that person to hell. As James emphasizes, what makes cursing especially evil is that the one whom we pronounce damnation is made in *God's likeness*."[52] The clear, culturally held understanding was, as alluded to previously, that only the holy and sovereign God holds the authority to judge and condemn.

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[49] Marc Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 109.

[50] Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 226.

[51] Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 16 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 161.

[52] Moo, *The Letter of James*, 163.

The same principle about image and deity appears again when John writes, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). Although the context in this passage involves the call for believers to love one another, John, like James, links the visible image bearer with the invisible God whose image is borne.[53] James 3:9 refers to verbal sin in cursing an image bearer, while John 4:20 addresses the heart attitude that compels it.

The one who curses another does so because he hates him and ignores the image of the unseen God in him. John would have the reader understand that hatred toward God's image is hatred toward God, just as James would have his reader understand that cursing God's image is equivalent to cursing God. An example of how these work together occurs in 1 Samuel 1 when Peninnah taunts Hannah for her barrenness. Scripture describes Peninnah as Hannah's rival and reveals that year by year, as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she provoked Hannah "*grievously* to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb" (vv. 6–7). Instead of having compassion for Hannah for her suffering, Peninnah sought to exacerbate Hannah's sorrow and circumstances through her taunting words. Verse 10 describes Hannah as "deeply distressed," praying and weeping bitterly before the Lord due to her barrenness. Sorrow overcame her to the point that she appeared to be drunk (vv. 14–15). Surely, Peninnah's words landed as salt on the open wounds of Hannah's heart. Such was Peninnah's intent. Due to the disposition of her heart, she chose words of insult over words of comfort.

Scripture does not merely convey the impact of words; it also warns of judgment against those who misuse them. In Matthew 12:36–37, Jesus warned that "on

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[53] The commands to love others and even one's enemies were already understood. See Lev 19:18b; Matt 5:43–44 // Mark 12:31 // Luke 10:27. John applies this command specifically to the body of Christ and invokes the image of the invisible God.

the day of judgment, people will give an account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." Every person will answer to God for how they have used language to fulfill selfish motives and in unloving ways, their words betraying what lies in their hearts (vs. 34). Those who use language to criticize, belittle, dehumanize, or shame others should take note of this warning, especially in light of another warning he issued in the Sermon on the Mount:

> Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then. You will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matt 7:1–5)

God holds humans accountable for how they speak to one another because his image is to be treated with dignity and honor. To misuse language is to dishonor his image both in the speaker and in the object of one's speech.

On the other hand, one who honors and respects the dignity of another person honors and respects God himself. Thus, blessing an image bearer is equivalent to blessing God, and loving an image bearer is demonstrating love for God. The blessing is the heart's expression of its orientation toward both God and the other. Jesus echoes this principle when he tells his disciples, "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me'" (Matt 25:40). Such behavior is not limited to deeds but also encompasses the use of life-giving language.

Life-giving words are redemptive in nature.[54] Samuel Logan observes that "[life-giving words] grip our spirits. They can motivate, encourage, heal, or strengthen us. Because speakers of those words are made in God's image, their words have the

[54] Tripp, *War of Words*, 181.

potential to spiritually and emotionally sustain anyone who hears them."[55] Scripture calls God's people to an agenda of replacing sinful words with redemptive speech so that our use of language will "no longer leave a trail of discouragement, destruction, and division" but will rather "be words of love, truth, grace, hope, faith, forgiveness, and peace, producing a harvest of righteousness."[56] In other words, human language is inherently designed to promote human flourishing (Prov 18:21).

According to Derek Kidner, life-giving words are marked by four characteristics.[57] First, they are honest. This means that they are accurate, sincere, and genuinely expressed. Additionally, they are few. There is an economy involved in the speaker endeavoring to avoid overwhelming the listener by saying more than is necessary for understanding to occur. Also, life-giving words are calmly or softly spoken. The speaker modulates his or her tone of voice in such a way as to avoid upsetting or agitating the listener unless doing so is necessary. Finally, the words are apt for the occasion. The wise speaker has measured and chosen fitting words to impart grace to the listener in the circumstances in which he has found himself. He adds that life-giving words are pondered rather than rashly offered and flow from righteous character. God desires that his image bearers be intentional in how we use language, motivated by his glory and for the good of those who hear.

A Word about Moral Agency among the Unregenerate

Before moving on to the next chapter, it seems pertinent to address whether the unregenerate are capable of behaving and speaking in morally good ways. As alluded to earlier in this chapter, it is only through redemption and renewal in Christ that human

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[55] Samuel T. Logan Jr., *The Good Name: The Power of Words to Hurt or Heal* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2019), 28.

[56] Tripp, *War of Words*, 181–82.

[57] The entirety of this paragraph is based on Kidner's commentary on Proverbs. See Kidner, *Proverbs*, 44–45.

hearts become oriented toward God and their motives directed toward loving service to him and others. But this is not to say that only the regenerate are capable of desiring and choosing what is morally good. It is fair to raise the question of how those alienated from God, the source of all good, might be capable of speaking and acting according to God's standards of good and refraining from evil. How, for example, could a spiritually dead person be capable of speaking life-giving words?

Bavinck addresses this dilemma: "The unregenerate may know the law externally but cannot do it; they may well display a likeness of the matter but do not really have the substance itself."[58] He argues that the virtues practiced among natural persons are, in a *temporal* manner, good, but not in comparison against the standard of God's holiness. By that standard, he writes, "they are completely wrong in their foundation, in the standard by which they are measured, and in their goal."[59] His argument concurs with Scripture's insistence that the faithless, natural man cannot please God through his good works (Heb 11:6).[60]

While the faithless person cannot please him, God has nonetheless graciously endowed humanity with common grace that enables even those who deny his existence or reject his authority to recognize and pursue elements of reality that are right and good. Van Til addresses this matter (a bit more optimistically than Bavinck) as follows: "Because of God's common grace, this ethical antithesis [of opposition to God] on the part of the sinner is restrained, and thereby the creative forces of man receive the opportunity of constructive effort. In this world, the sinner does many 'good' things. He

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[58] Herman Bavinck, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Ethics*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 158.

[59] Bavinck, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, 158.

[60] Bavinck, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, 157.

is honest. He helps alleviate the sufferings of his fellow men. He 'keeps' the moral law."[61]

Abraham Kuyper describes common grace as working in two dimensions. In the first sense, it restrains people from fully acting in accordance with the depravity that characterizes their hearts. He writes that the sinner owes the capacity to do good "in spite of his nature being totally depraved, exclusively to the grace of God, who temporarily and to varying degrees arrests the consistent, continuing effect of depravity at the root of man's nature."[62] In a second sense, according to Kuyper, common grace allows the unregenerate to act in ways conducive to the progression of society in fulfillment of the cultural mandate. Kuyper leans heavily on the work of John Calvin, who writes,

> God indeed favors none but the elect alone with the Spirit of regeneration, and that by this they are distinguished from the reprobate; for they are renewed after his image and receive the earnest of the Spirit in hope of the future inheritance, and by the same Spirit the Gospel is sealed in their hearts. But I cannot admit that all this is any reason why He should not grant the reprobate also some taste of his grace, why He should not irradiate their minds with some sparks of his light, why he should not give them some perception of his goodness, and in some sort engrave his words on their hearts.[63]

Such grace ultimately operates for the good of humanity and all creation.

Nate Brooks recognizes the ability of the unregenerate to speak and act in accordance with moral goodness. He separates one's heart orientation from his heart's operations.[64] An unregenerate husband cannot change the unrighteous orientation of his heart to a righteous one, but he can learn to treat his wife with kindness and respect. He cannot please God because his actions are not rooted and grounded in faith. Nonetheless,

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[61] Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 226.

[62] Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, vol. 1, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas, ed. Jordan D. Ballor and Stephen J. Grabill, Abraham Kuyper's Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 2.26.2, EBSCO.

[63] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. and ed. John Owen (1549; repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1948), chap. 6.

[64] Nate Brooks, *Identifying Heart Transformation: Exploring Different Kinds of Human Change* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2022), 53–65.

he can change the operations of his heart in ways that promote and enhance the flourishing of his marriage. In other words, he can do moral good without having been made morally righteous. These capabilities exist because God's moral law is written on the hearts of his image bearers enough to experience conflicts of conscience regarding matters of good and evil (Rom 2:14–16) and to alleviate those conflicts of conscience by doing what is good.

Scripture provides numerous examples in which persons alienated from God act in morally upright ways for the good of the world. For instance, Pharaoh's daughter rescued the Hebrew baby Moses from the death sentence pronounced upon all Hebrew-born males. Another example occurs in the book of Nehemiah when King Artaxerxes noticed Nehemiah's sorrow and inquired as to its cause. Wanting to alleviate Nehemiah's sadness, the king sent him away with the letters, materials, officers, and horsemen necessary to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (2:1–9). Though neither Pharaoh's daughter nor King Artaxerxes worshiped the God of Israel nor recognized his sovereign divinity, God used each to do good for the people of Israel.

Linguistically, common grace is made manifest when those without faith or those who use language without regard for God or his purposes nevertheless use language for the benefit of society. In multiple places in the New Testament, Paul uses the words of pagans to illustrate his assertions (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33; Titus 1:12). An unregenerate mother soothes her crying child with comforting reassurances of love and safety—perhaps as Pharaoh's daughter soothed young Moses when he experienced fear or injury. A spiritually dead attorney composes oral arguments to seek justice for an abandoned mother in court. An air traffic control agent who gives no thought to God guides a commercial pilot toward a safe landing, protecting the lives of hundreds of passengers who bear God's image. In myriad and constant ways, society benefits from morally good uses of language that spring from hearts far from God. This is not to say that the speech of the unregenerate is not fallen at its core, but only that words rarely

reflect the depravity of the hearts from which they are uttered. Common grace is at work in the unsaved in such a way that enables them to use language for good purposes, being restrained by the Spirit from sin's full effect that would lead them to utter only that which would fully exhibit their depravity.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have argued that language is moral in nature and that humans, as speaking agents, are responsible before God for the content of their language and the purposes and functions for which language is used. I began by briefly discussing that humans were created as morally good, but that antithesis emerged in the garden, which led to a reorientation of the human heart away from God and toward self. I argued that moral choices spring from the heart and that only those in Christ can please God through moral decisions, while all humans are responsible for making morally upright choices. Second, I discussed moral normativity, arguing that assessing moral righteousness is based upon (1) God's perfect moral character, (2) Jesus's incarnate example of God's moral perfection, and (3) Scripture, which makes these former two norms accessible to us today and presents to us God's law as the perfect moral standard that Jesus fulfilled perfectly. Third, I applied morality to language, noting that the two are inseparable. I emphasized that morally upright language images God's character to creation, adheres to God's purposes for language, and functions according to God's design for language, listing seven specific functions in Scripture. I argued that, in contrast, morally corrupt language fails to image God's heart but images man's sinful nature, fails to align with God's purpose for human language, and fails to function according to God's design for language, providing examples of morally corrupt linguistic functions as found in Scripture. Fourth, I explored the impact of language on others. I distinguished between life-directing words of wisdom and death-directed words of folly. I then turned my attention toward life-giving words and God's call for his people to use redemptive

language, understanding their ambassadorial role in creation. Finally, I discussed common grace as it applies to the unregenerate. I noted that because God provides common grace, even the unregenerate can use morally upright language, though they cannot please God.

In the next chapter, I will argue that language is covenantal in nature. I will explore how language is used to establish, renew, nurture, and sustain covenantal relationships and subsequently narrow my focus to its central role within the marriage covenant.

CHAPTER 5

LANGUAGE IS COVENANTAL IN NATURE

Human language is more than simply a vehicle for exchanging ideas and exercising influence—it serves as the primary conduit by which humans are empowered to know, love, and live in covenant with God and one another.[1] In a sense, covenant is built into the conversational process: two communicative agents endeavor to transmit and receive ideas according to a standard set of codes and rules until a common understanding is achieved. Kevin Vanhoozer argues that this "covenant of discourse" is seen in two dimensions, which, according to him, are the "inter-subjective bond between speakers and the objective bond between language and reality."[2] He describes a general sense in which all linguistic communication between persons is covenantal. However, language is also central to more specific and intimate covenantal relations. It is through language that covenants are formed, renewed, and nurtured.

In this chapter, I will argue that human language is covenantal in nature and that its proper use is integral to forming, renewing, and nurturing the marital covenant. To support my argument, I will first explore the major covenants presented in Scripture. Second, I will observe the connection between language and covenant, arguing that it is through language that covenants are formed and nurtured. Third, I will focus on the specific covenant of marriage as the primary human covenant and discuss how spouses use language to form and sustain the covenantal union of marriage. Fourth, I will examine the marital covenant's mission—that of imaging to the world the covenant

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[1] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 206, Kindle.

[2] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 206.

between Christ and the church—and discuss how language is implicated in that mission.

Covenants in Scripture

Just as the Trinity is the origin and source of language, the Trinity is the origin and source of covenant.[3] According to Herman Bavinck, there exists no possible fellowship between this triune Creator and us apart from the notion of covenant, and religion itself must be understood only in terms of covenant.[4] In this section, I will offer a brief discussion of the eternal covenant of redemption. Second, I will discuss the meaning and the nature of covenants as understood in Scripture and in the ANE along with their common elements. Third, I will examine the major biblical covenants that result in the economy from the eternal divine covenants. Fourth, I will discuss the centrality of *hesed* to the biblical understanding of covenants.

The Divine Eternal Covenant of Redemption

The covenant from which all subsequent covenants flow existed before creation because "God eternally determined to manifest his triune glory by way of covenant," which he would carry out "in the missions of the Son and the Spirit."[5] This eternal covenant, or the *pactum salutis*, is most commonly referred to as the covenant of redemption. Michael Horton describes this covenant as the Trinitarian "eternal decree to elect, redeem, call, justify, sanctify, and glorify a people for the Son."[6] It has existed eternally in the mind and will of God "distinct from the execution of it in time and

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[3] I owe my development of this subsection to Daniel Scheiderer and am grateful for his retrieval of the early Baptist doctrine of *pactum salutis* and his demonstration of its congruence with classical theism. See Daniel David Scheiderer, "Eternal Covenant: The Trinitarian Shape of an Historic Baptist Doctrine" (PhD diss., Louisville, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022).

[4] Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 569–70.

[5] Scheiderer, "Eternal Covenant," 3, 93.

[6] Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 82.

space."[7] In other words, the entire plan of redemptive history has existed eternally in the mind of God prior to creation. This intra-Trinitarian pact represents the singular divine covenant in which no human party is involved.[8]

While the covenant of redemption serves as the foundation of all subsequent divine covenants revealed in Scripture, it is also the referent toward which those covenants are analogically directed.[9] When we speak of God's eternal covenantal decree to redeem creation, we do so within the confines of creaturely limitation. Therefore, we do not speak of it univocally, as though we understand it as God does in its eternal existence before creation. Nor do we speak of it the same way we speak of the covenants within the economy. Instead, God's people speak of the decree only in terms God has chosen in Scripture to reveal it, which are by necessity accommodated to mankind through human language.

We recognize that, in some ways, covenants within the economy are similar while in other ways different than the eternal referent. For example, covenants within the economy involve two or more parties with separate wills, while the *pactum salutis* is a decree of the singular mind and will of God. Covenants within humanity involve changes of relational status, yet the divine pact exists eternally in the mind and will of God, who is immutable. Covenants in the economy are geared toward creaturely need, yet the triune God is sufficient within himself, lacking nothing. Before the foundations of the world, he is God. Despite these differences, the covenant of redemption is the eternal well from which all covenants within the created order spring forth.

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[7] Scheiderer, "Eternal Covenant," 115.

[8] For information on how the doctrine of the eternal covenant is compatible with a classical theistic understanding of eternal divine communication, see Scheiderer, "Eternal Covenant," 112–26.

[9] For a thorough discussion on analogy as it pertains to the eternal covenant, see Scheiderer, "Eternal Covenant," chap. 4.

The Nature of Covenants

The theme of covenant appears throughout the Old and New Testaments, though most prominently in the Old Testament. While scholarly debate exists as to a precise definition, William Dumbrell defines the Hebrew term for covenant, *berît* (a "bond" or a "fetter), as "an understanding intended to regulate conduct and relationships between two parties."[10] Thomas Schreiner offers another simple definition: "[A] covenant is a chosen relationship in which two parties make binding promises to each other."[11] While covenants may vary in terms of conditionality and unconditionality, every covenant involves three key components: (1) it entails a relationship; (2) the relationship is chosen rather than natural; and (3) it involves mutual and binding pledges, and requirements.[12] Such covenants may be unilaterally imposed or jointly entered, yet they are nonetheless binding.[13]

Covenants were common in the ANE and were often, though not in all cases, understood in terms of an agreement between a party in a position of greater power and one in a position of lesser power. Michael Horton describes, for example, the suzerain-vassal treaty in which a greater king, or suzerain, entered a covenant agreement with a lesser king, or vassal, granting him protection and provision in exchange for loyalty and annexation of his domain.[14] In comparison, a royal charter or land grant involved a transfer of position or property from a god or king to someone in a lesser position to gain

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[10] William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology*, rev. and enlarged ed. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013).

[11] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 13.

[12] Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose*, 14.

[13] Horton, *God of Promise*, 10. Horton's views are based in large part on the arguments of Meredith G. Kline. For more on this type of covenant, see Meredith G. Kline, *Essential Writings of Meredith Kline*, eBook ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2017), 152–67.

[14] Horton, *God of Promise*, 24.

future loyalty.[15] The former type of covenant emphasized the interstate relationships between the two parties, while the grant concerned itself with interpersonal relationships and the favor shown by the greater sovereign to the lesser one.[16] Scripture also mentions various covenants between equals, such as the one formed between Abraham and Abimelech found in Genesis 21 in which each pledged to deal kindly and honestly with the other (vv. 22–34). Such covenants also benefitted both parties.

The stark difference between a contract and a covenant underscores the importance of the covenantal concept. Richard Amesbury offers five critical distinctions between the two entities. First, while contractual relationships are considered temporary and more easily modified or terminated, covenantal relationships are considered open-ended and deepening. Second, a contract can be viewed as a means to an end, whereas a covenant can be viewed as the end rather than the means. Third, contractual relationships do not change the identity of the parties, but those who enter into covenantal relationships experience some newness of identity. For instance, through covenant one becomes a husband, a wife, or a beloved saint. Fourth, those who enter contractual relations maintain their autonomy. In contrast, those who enter into covenantal relations give themselves over to the other in trust, with each party taking responsibility for the other in some way. Fifth, contracts are defined by terms, but covenants are defined by relationships.[17] Scott Hahn remarks that a contract is motivated by profit and self-interest, promising that "this is yours, that is mine," while a covenant is based upon self-

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[15] Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 216, Kindle. See also John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood: Literary and Intertextual Perspectives on an Image of Israel in Exodus 19:6*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 395 (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 178.

[16] Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 183, quoted in Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 218.

[17] Richard Amesbury, "Trust, Covenant, and Responsibility," *Hermeneutische Blätter* 1, no. 2 (2010): 174–75.

sacrificing love and loyalty, declaring an oath that "I am yours, you are mine."[18]

Major Biblical Covenants

As the outgrowth of his divine eternal covenant, God built the entirety of redemptive history upon a framework of successive covenants between himself and humanity.[19] God established a covenant relationship with Adam and Eve in what Schreiner calls the creation covenant.[20] In a broad sense, all creation exists in covenant with God. When he spoke the world into existence, he covenantally prescribed it.[21] Esther Meek argues that God's repetitive use of "Let there be" in Scripture represents prescriptive language that the world continues to obey by its perpetual existence. She writes,

> On the assumption of creation as ontologically dependent, every moment of its existence constitutes God's ongoing "let there be"-ing. This is what Scripture identifies as God's covenant faithfulness, or "steadfast love." Everything that we call created reality exists and is what it is because of the normative and formative word of God prescribing it into existence and sustaining that existence in his steadfast covenant relationship. Everything exists by virtue of a covenant relationship to the Lord of all.[22]

As with human covenants, rules are involved because they prescribe—or norm—things

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[18] Scott Hahn, "Covenant," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016). The entirety of this subsection is influenced by Jared Scott Poulton's recent dissertation, "Reforming Counseling: The Adaptation of Van Tilian Concepts by Jay Adams" (PhD diss, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024), 150. I am indebted to both Poulton and Kyle Claunch for their feedback on this chapter.

[19] Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 221. Note that Gentry and Wellum have skipped past Christ's fulfillment of the Noahic covenant, asserting that while Christ "fulfills all the covenants in himself and the new covenant . . . various aspects of the covenants are fulfilled in Christ's two advents" (902). They view the Noahic covenant as continuing in effect until the return of Christ.

[20] However, Schreiner suggests the Noahic covenant is excluded from the covenants fulfilled in Christ because this covenant concerned the preservation rather than redemption of the world. See Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose*, 46, 120.

[21] Meek supports emerging Reformed arguments that "the language of Scripture, from creation onward, is covenant language." See Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 152, Kindle. For more on this assertion, Meek suggests Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1968).

[22] Meek, *Loving to Know*, 152.

into existence.[23] As God's vice-regent representatives to creation, humanity is called to live in covenant with creation, serving God by ruling over it and caring for it in the same manner God rules over and cares for us.

In addition to the creation covenant, God formed a covenant with Adam in which he identified himself and Adam as the parties involved, presented stipulations and conditions, and promised blessing or cursing based upon Adam's obedience or disobedience.[24] It was through language that God revealed to Adam the stipulation that would yield life or death in this covenant of works.[25] Subsequent to the covenants found in Genesis 1–3, Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum identify five major covenants: the Noahic covenant (Gen 6–9), the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12; 15; 17; 22), the Sinaitic covenant (Exod 19:3b–8; 20–24), the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7; Ps 89), and the new covenant (Jer 31–34; Ezek 33:29–39:29).[26] This new covenant marks the fulfillment of all preceding covenants. Jesus became the better Adam, living a perfect, sinless life, paying the ransom for Adam's sin, and therein delivering the elect from the curse of sin and death (Rom 5:12–21). As the "true Israel," he fulfilled the Sinaitic covenant, "fulfilling Israel's role and bring[ing] the old covenant to its terminus in him (Gal 3:1–4:7)."[27] He fulfilled the Abrahamic covenant as the seed who "constitutes all those in faith union with him as true children of Abraham and inheritors of all the Abrahamic promises (Rom 2:25–29; 4:9–22; Gal 3:6–9; Heb 2:14–18; Rev 5:9–10)."[28] He fulfilled

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[23] Meek, *Loving to Know*, 153.

[24] Some theologians dismiss this as a covenant; however, Schreiner's and Horton's arguments in support of this view are compelling. See Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose*, 19–23. See also Horton, *God of Promise*, 89–90.

[25] Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 571.

[26] Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 218. The remainder of this paragraph is based on the assertions of Gentry and Wellum presented in *Kingdom through Covenant*, chap. 17.

[27] Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 967.

[28] Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 967. See also Jason S. DeRouchie, "Counting Stars with Abraham and the Prophets: New Covenant Ecclesiology in OT Perspective," *JETS* 58, no. 3 (2015): 445–85.

the Davidic covenant as David's "greater Son," who received in fullness and has poured out the Spirit on his people, who is seated on the throne and continues to reign, and who is "leading history to its consummation at his return (Matt 1:1; 28:18–20; Luke 1:31–33; Acts 2:32–36; Rom 1:3–4; Eph 1:9–10, 18–23; Phil 2:9–11; Col 1:15–20; Heb 1 [cf. Pss 2; 45; 110])."[29] The Old Testament covenants between God and his people, therefore, point toward Christ as the fulfillment of the redemptive covenant.

While all humanity remains bound to the creation covenant, every individual additionally lives either under the curse of the covenant of works or the mercy of the covenant of grace.[30] Humans are born under the covenant of works because they are descendents of Adam, their federal head who broke covenant with God (Hos 6:7; Rom 5:12–19). Richard Belcher observes that God condescended to establish this covenant with humanity by stipulation and that humanity's re-stipulation entails obedience to what he requires.[31] Because Adam sinned, all of his descendants are born covenant-breakers, incapable of fulfilling the law God requires (Rom 3:23).

While the unregenerate remain under the curse of the covenant of works, those who have been made new in Christ live under the new covenant, or the covenant of grace.[32] The former was established with the first Adam, whereas the latter was ushered in by the second and perfect Adam, Jesus Christ (Rom 5:18–19). Through faith in this second Adam, God's covenant people no longer live under the curse of sin and death (Rom 5:20–21). Consequently, covenant and morality are inextricably bound together. As it happens, those who live under the covenant of works are unregenerate and have hearts

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[29] Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 967.

[30] Scholars disagree on the concepts of a creation covenant and/or a covenant of works. My dissertation is not dependent upon the perspective I embrace regarding these covenants. For more information on existing debate, see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 97–100.

[31] Richard P. Belcher Jr., *The Fulfillment of the Promises of God: An Explanation of Covenant Theology* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2020), 204.

[32] Horton, *God of Promise*, 93.

oriented away from God toward self, whereas those who live under the covenant of grace have hearts oriented toward God. Therefore, those who live under the covenant of grace can please God through their obedience, having been united with Christ who obeyed and fulfilled the law perfectly (Rom 5:20–21).

One crucial element that sets biblical covenants apart from the covenants general to the Hittite or Assyrian understanding of covenant common in the ANE—and which set the Hebrew God apart from the gods of the pagans—was the sheer depth and intimate nature of *hesed*. This Hebrew term defies English translation. Gordon Clark notes that *hesed* includes components of grace, mercy, compassion, faithfulness, reliability, and confidence, but it is broader and greater than any or all of these concepts combined.[33] Rather than a disposition of self-regard and demand from others, the Hebrew God condescends to care for the needs of his people and to demonstrate compassion, faithfulness, mercy, love, and provision for them. He orients himself toward their well-being rather than his own and acts at his own expense rather than at theirs. Walter Brueggemann observes that "this God makes a break with all cultural definitions and expectations and stands distant from the other gods who are preoccupied with their rule, their majesty, their well-being in the plush silence of heaven."[34] The God revealed in Scripture stoops down to humanity with a disposition deeply oriented toward people's well-being, calling them into an intimate relationship in which he will be their God and they will be his people.

The Centrality of Hesed

The term *hesed* adds the crucial element of deepest affections to the concept of

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[33] Gordon R. Clark, *The Word "Hesed" in the Hebrew Bible*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 157 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 267–68.

[34] Walter Brueggemann, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 44.

covenant.[35] Such affections motivated the *hesed* grantor to act toward the benefit of its recipient.[36] In the Old Testament, its usage often describes one party's ongoing acts of love, mercy, and deliverance toward a person or group desperate for help, culminating in forgiveness and the preservation of the relationship.[37] Clark elaborates that *hesed* acts are performed in the "context of a deep and enduring commitment between two persons or parties, by one who is able to render assistance to the needy party who in the circumstances is unable to help him- or herself."[38] Frank Dickey concurs that *hesed* is demonstrated through action: "*Hesed* is not an abstract; it is not merely an attitude or a profession of good will. It is a demonstrated way of acting."[39] And that way of acting, on the part of the Hebrew God, is sacrificially bent toward the unmerited good of his people. Psalm 103 reveals that the compassionate and merciful God of Scripture reaches out in *hesed* to the undeserving in grace, restraining his wrath and loving them with abounding unchanging love.[40]

Importantly, *hesed* is not a unidirectional dynamic. While it begins with God and extends toward his people, his recipients are called to extend this *hesed* in three dimensions. First, they are to exhibit reciprocal *hesed* toward God through worship, loyalty, and obedience (Jer 2:2; Hos 4:2). Second, they are to extend *hesed* relationally toward others with whom they are in special covenant, such as is the case in marriage, within the people of God, or even special friendships like the one between David and

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[35] Horton, *God of Promise*, 25.

[36] Sakenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 73.

[37] Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Khesed," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, *I–Ma*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 495–96.

[38] Clark, *The Word "Hesed"*, 267.

[39] Frank L. Dickey Jr., "The Development of the Hebrew Idea of Hesed in the Biblical Literature" (DMin thesis, The School of Theology at Claremont, 1976), 13.

[40] J. A. Motyer, "The Psalms," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. G. J. Wenham et al., 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 553.

Jonathan (Judg 8:34–35; 1 Sam 20:12–17).[41] Third, as part of their obligation under the creation covenant, they are to extend *hesed* representationally to others, including humanity in general and especially persons most vulnerable to oppression, such as widows, orphans, and sojourners (Ruth 4:1–12; 2 Sam 9:1–13). While *hesed* is not specifically mentioned, special kindness toward such disadvantaged persons is also commanded or exemplified as important elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., Exod 22:21–22; Deut 10:18; 14:29; 16:14; 24:17, 19; 27:19; Pss 68:5; 82:3–4; 146:9; Isa 1:17, 23; Jer 7:6; 22:3; Zech 7:9–10; Mal 3:5; 1 Tim 5:3; Jas 1:27). God's people are morally obligated to extend *hesed* because they are the recipients of divine *hesed*. "Failure to love one's neighbor," Richard Taylor and Ray Clendenen argue, "evidences a failure to love God."[42] To live in covenant with God and others is to live in relationships characterized by *hesed*.

Only those reconciled to God through Christ can demonstrate true covenant love. Christ embodied *hesed* in all three dimensions, and it is through union with him that believers are enabled to likewise receive, reciprocate, and extend *hesed,* becoming covenant-keepers. Kevin Vanhoozer argues, "To be in Christ is to recover one's true humanity and deepest identity, as covenant servants—prophets, priests, and vice-regents—of the covenant Lord. To be in Christ is therefore to be not an arbitrary but an authentic and answerable self, a disciple."[43] In other words, they are restored to the design which enables them to function in relationship to God, others, and creation and carry out the functions and roles as God's image to creation. They move from the category of covenant-breakers to covenant-keepers. The remainder—the covenant-

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[41] Gentry and Wellum emphasize that even though children are related by blood to their parents, Scripture considers the relationship between parents and children covenantal. The parents care for their children much as God cares for his, and children are to obey and honor parents as God's children are to obey and honor him. See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 214.

[42] Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, New American Commentary 21A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 326.

[43] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 127.

breakers—remain alienated from the experience of true covenant. Because they are vertically cut off from genuine covenantal unity with God, they are likewise cut off horizontally from such unity with other image bearers. Sin corrupts humanity's original design as covenant relational beings.

The Connection between Language and Covenant

Language is essential to covenants; no covenant could be formed without the use of words. The renowned English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) recognizes this, observing, "Without speech among men there would be no more commonwealth, society, contract, or peace than there is among lions, bears, and wolves."[44] Indeed, through human words, God established covenant with humanity and identified himself to them so that he would be knowable to them.[45] Timothy Ward writes, "God chooses to use words as a fundamental means of relating to us, we must presume, because the kind of relationship he chooses to establish cannot be established without them."[46] His words are designed for covenant relationship. Ward adds that "the words [God] uses need to be words human beings can comprehend, since only if the covenant promise is given in such words is it a covenant to which we can respond."[47] Language is, by God's design, the primary agent by which humans connect vertically with God and horizontally with one another in covenantal relations and grow in their knowledge of and delight in God and others outside of themselves.

As highlighted previously, covenants should be viewed in terms of a heart disposition of *hesed*—one that is wholly, loyally, and self-sacrificially aimed toward the

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[44] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Marshall Missner, Longman Library of Primary Sources in Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 2008), 15.

[45] Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 30, Kindle.

[46] Ward, *Words of Life*, 31.

[47] Ward, *Words of Life*, 51.

wellbeing of the other. Jesus taught his followers that language flows from the abundance of the heart (Matt 12:34b; 15:11, 19; Luke 6:45). Scripture exemplifies this connection when it reports that because Joseph's brothers hated him, "they could not speak peacefully to him" (Gen 37:4b). Because every human heart is oriented either toward God and thus others or away from God toward self, language also will be driven either by love for and desire to bless God and others or by self-serving motives. The language of God's people should spring forth from a heart disposition of *hesed* toward God reciprocally, toward those in covenant relationally, and toward the rest of humanity.

From creation, God has used human language as the vehicle by which he has established covenant with humanity. When Creator God formed Adam, he spoke to him. He issued commands to multiply and fill the earth, subdue it, and exercise dominion over it (Gen 1:28). He gave him instructions, explaining all he would provide for him (Gen 1:29; 2:16). He used words to issue a restriction, warning Adam of the curse that would be upon him if he violated that restriction by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree (Gen 2:17). After the flood, God spoke in human language to Noah and renewed the covenant, promising to preserve humanity from destruction and setting the rainbow in the sky as a visible seal.[48] Later, God verbally covenanted with Abraham, promising to make him a great nation through descendants from which the promised Messiah would emerge, to give him land, and to bless the nations through his lineage (Gen 15, 17).[49] At Sinai, God spoke to his prophet Moses and then, through Moses, used words to covenant with Israel (Exod 19–24). As the prophet Jeremiah wrote, God called his people to hear the *words* of his covenant and to obey his commands, that they would be his people and receive his promises (Jer 11:2–5). Through Nathan, God spoke human words to establish his covenant with David to give him a throne that would extend into eternity (2 Sam 7:1–17;

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[48] Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose*, 34–36.

[49] Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose*, 43.

1 Chron 17:1–15). Finally, God spoke through Christ, the Living Word, who fulfilled the promises of all preceding covenants by ushering in the new covenant (2 Cor 1:20–22; 1 Tim 2:5; Heb 1:1–2; 9:15). Such was the case with each covenant God forged, renewed, or expanded with humanity. Again and again, God invites his people to draw near to him by embracing covenantal promises conveyed through his use of human language.

Human language also served as the vehicle by which biblical covenants were renewed. Schreiner lists as an example the covenant renewed at Moab by Moses to the generation of Israelites entering the Promised Land (Deut 29).[50] Likewise, Schreiner notes, Joshua renewed the Sinai covenant with the Israelites, who vowed to forsake other gods and follow Yahweh (Josh 8:30–35).[51] Both parties—Joshua on God's behalf and the people of Israel—entered into covenant renewal through human language.
Moreover, whenever God's people broke covenant with him, he used language to rebuke them and call them back toward faithfulness and life. This pattern is seen repeatedly in the books of the prophets, such as in Hosea 2 when God charges Israel with whoredom and yet promises her mercy. Not coincidentally, God uses Hosea's marriage covenant with unfaithful Gomer to illuminate to the Israelites their covenant-breaking against the backdrop of his covenant faithfulness. In both the analogical covenant of human marriage and the referential covenant between God and his people, language inaugurates and substantiates the covenant.

Marriage as the Primary Human Covenant

The primary and most intimate covenant formed between two human beings is that of marriage. Among Christians, marriage entails a sacred bond between one man and one woman who commit themselves to one another before God and others. John Stott defines marriage as a covenant that is "ordained and sealed by God, preceded by a public

[50] Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose*, 62–63.

[51] Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose*, 63.

leaving of parents, consummated in sexual union, issuing in a permanent mutually supportive partnership, and normally crowned by the gift of children."[52] God established marriage when he created Adam and Eve in Genesis 1–2 and upholds a sacred understanding of its nature and value in both the Old and New Testaments (Gen 2:24; Prov 2:16–19; Mal 2:13–16; Mark 10:9; 1 Cor 7:1–12; Eph 5:22–33; Heb 13:4; 1 Pet 3:1–7). By God's design, the human bond from which all of society and culture would spring forth was the covenant between a man and his wife.

Andreas Köstenberger suggests there are five essential aspects to the covenantal view of marriage: (1) it is permanent until death, except under certain circumstances outlined in Scripture; (2) it is sacred, entered into before God and under his authority; (3) it is intimate, bringing a man and woman together as a one-flesh union; (4) it is mutual, with both partners devoting themselves to the well-being of the other, forgiving one another when necessary, and committing themselves to steadfast love for one another; and, (5) it is exclusive, meaning they will forsake all others and give themselves only to one another.[53] Furthermore, unlike God's covenant with the elect, marriage does not extend into eternity. Instead, it is a temporal covenant God established as a common grace gift to all humanity.

Husbands and wives enter this temporal but exceedingly weighty marital covenant through *language*. With words, they form a union that will involve relating to one another in ways distinctly different from how they relate to others. They vocalize promises, stipulations, self-sacrifice, and an endpoint, which is the natural death of one or, in rare cases, both parties. For each, this new covenant requires a measure of dying to self. While their unique designs as individuals remain, they become something new in

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[52] John R. Stott, *Involvement*, vol. 2, *Social and Sexual Relationships in the Modern World* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984), 163.

[53] Andreas Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), chap. 4, sec. 2, para. 1.

their togetherness. They acquire divinely designed identities and roles within the covenant, and these are good. While the sexual union consummates the covenant, language remains the initiator of the covenant and the formative agent that shapes its wellbeing.

The Old Testament affirms the sanctity of the marital covenant in Malachi 2:13–16 and directly links it to covenant faithfulness to God. Malachi uses the term *bāgad* in verse 14, which means to "break faith."[54] In this passage, God refuses to accept the offerings of those who abandon the wives of their youth, describing them as covering their garments with violence (2:16). Therefore, God's Word teaches that an essential component of covenant-keeping with God is covenant-keeping with one's spouse. Gordon Hugenberger expounds, "If a covenant existed between a husband and his wife, because God is invoked in any covenant-ratifying oath to act as guarantor of the covenant, any marital offense by either the husband or the wife may be identified as sin . . . against God."[55] By means of covenant, two entities are united to form one new entity that is unique from all others. Through Malachi, God rebuked husbands who had broken covenant not just with their wives but with him who had ordained and sealed their marriages. Selfishly and rebelliously, they set aside their wives, ignoring the sanctity of the covenant. God, in turn, ignored their offerings (2:13). This passage reveals that God's plan for marriage, as established in Genesis 1, remains firm, regardless of the effects of sin. He holds his people accountable to their vows. This covenant of marriage remains God's good gift to humanity.

Covenant and Missional Complementarity

As sacred as Scripture portrays marriage in the Old Testament, the importance

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[54] Taylor and Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, 325.

[55] Gordon Paul Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage Developed from the Perspective of Malachi* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 282.

of this covenant expands in the New Testament. Paul reveals its central mission of exhibiting the glorious covenant between Christ and the church (Eph 5:22–33). While covenant-breaking diminishes the world's view of Christ and the church, covenant-keeping points to the gospel's beauty. For this reason, John Piper refers to marriage as "God's showcase of covenant-keeping grace."[56] He observes, "Marriage exists ultimately to display the covenant-keeping love between Christ and his church. . . . Christ's new covenant with the church is created and sustained by blood-bought grace, therefore, human marriages are meant to showcase that new-covenant grace."[57] Piper suggests that the practical application of this requires both the husband and wife to live vertically in relationship to God, experiencing justification and mercy from him, then bending these outward and applying them toward his or her spouse.[58] They are to forgive as they have been forgiven. Likewise, though they are both sinners, they are to view one another through the lens of justification—remembering that the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to them. Even in cases where one spouse is an unbeliever, the believing spouse is called to honor and keep the marital covenant, loving the other and imparting the grace that he or she has already received from God (1 Cor 7:12–16; 1 Pet 3:1–6).[59]

Both spouses bear responsibility for obeying the one-another commands given in Scripture to God's people. For example, Paul's instructions to the believers of Colossae form the foundation upon which Piper bases his understanding of how spouses are to live in unity. Paul writes, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,

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[56] John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 41.

[57] Piper, *This Momentary Marriage*, 42–43.

[58] Piper, *This Momentary Marriage*, 43–48.

[59] This is not to say that divorce is never biblically permissible. Scripture recognizes the covenant-breaking nature of some sins, such as adultery, abandonment, or abuse. See Jim Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: Critical Questions and Answers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 239–44, 254–65, Kindle. See also Jeremy Pierre and Greg Wilson, *When Home Hurts: A Guide for Responding Wisely to Domestic Abuse in Your Church* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2021, 237–44.

compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col 3:12–13). Paul first directs the Colossians' attention toward the justification and grace they have received as God's elect and then calls them to bend these outward toward one another. Without having been chosen and set apart in Christ, this one-another, Spirit-empowered display of the gospel would be impossible. The same is true within marriage, yet God designed marriage from the beginning as a micro-display of this greater referent—Christ and the church.

The similarities between Paul's instruction conveyed in Colossians 3:12–13 and the concept of covenantal *hesed* should not escape notice. Douglas Moo describes each of these "put-on" virtues in detail. First, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved—the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament *hasidim*—believers are to put on compassion toward one another. Moo notes that the use of the Greek term *splanchna*, translated here as compassion, would more literally be translated as "bowels of mercy," meaning "love characterized by 'mercy,' 'heartfelt compassion,' . . . or 'tenderhearted mercy.'"[60] The second virtue they are to put on, kindness (*chrēstotēs*), "sometimes denotes God's own 'goodness' especially as it is expressed in his gracious acts (e.g., Pss 31:19; 68:11; 119:68; Rom 2:4; 11:22; Eph 2:7; Titus 3:4)."[61]

The inclusion of humility (*tapeinophrosynē*) in Paul's list captures the sacrificial aspect of *hesed*. Moo connects it with Philippians 2:3b–4, in which Paul instructs believers to value others above themselves and to look not only to their own interests but to the interests of others. This virtue, Moo notes, is epitomized by Christ's supreme act of "taking on human form and going to the cross on our behalf" (Phil 2:3, 8). Additionally, these believers are to put on gentleness (*praütēta*), an aspect which, along

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[60] Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 277.

[61] Moo, *Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 277.

with humility, downplays one's sense of self-importance in favor of the other, mimicking the Christ who is "gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt 11:29).[62]

Finally, Paul lists the virtue of patience (*makrothymia*), which Moo connects to the Father's and Christ's attitude displayed toward sinners. In verse 13, Paul exhorts these believers to "bear with each other and forgive one another." According to Moo, this mandate is likely meant to constitute "the natural outgrowth of the general attitude conveyed by all five virtues [listed in verse 12] together."[63] In this short passage, therefore, we see a New Testament snapshot of covenantal *hesed* and understand from it, as from the rest of the New Testament, that Christ embodied this perfectly toward the church. Since the covenantal union between a husband and his wife is analogous to this Christ-church union, marriage should likewise be marked by such *hesed*.

While both spouses are obligated to obey God's moral standards for speech, complementarian churches affirm husbands as holding positions of headship and authority in marriage and, therefore, as positions of greater responsibility. In Ephesians 5:25–28, Paul draws a distinct link between the model and manner of headship exhibited by Christ toward the church and that expected of husbands toward their wives. This headship, as Andrew Lincoln notes, "is patterned on the unique character of Christ's headship over the Church, and . . . that sort of headship included Christ's giving his life for the Church."[64] Jack Cottrell concurs: while the "essence of [Christ's] headship is leadership in authority," the manner in which it is exercised is self-sacrificing service.[65]

The scriptural foundation for this assertion is found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In chapter 1, Paul addresses the aspect of Jesus's authority, revealing that the

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[62] Moo, *Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 277–78.

[63] Moo, *Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 278.

[64] Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 370.

[65] Jack Cottrell, *Headship, Submission, and the Bible: Gender Roles in the Home* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2008), 302.

Father raised Jesus and seated him above all rule and authority and gave him as head over all things for the church (1:20–22). In chapter 5, Paul emphasizes that Jesus used his authority for the good of his bride at his own sacrifice (5:25–26). The model Christ exemplifies is characterized by "gentleness toward and tender affection for the church, genuine concern for her needs, a complete unselfishness, and a willingness to sacrifice even his own life for the church's happiness and well-being."[66] His actions are oriented toward the Father's glory and the church's benefit. Cottrell continues,

> He lovingly provides what is necessary to save her from harm, to build her up, and to lead her to a state of final purity and completeness. . . . The point is that the one who has authority is in a position either to hurt or to help; Christ's clear command and explicit example show us all, and especially husbands, that we must use authority only for the help and benefit of those who are under it.[67]

This perspective spotlights the incongruence between Christ's command and the notion of self-serving rule. The second person of the triune God who created all that exists came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28 // Mark 10:45). He, the Master, washes the feet of the servants (John 13:4–11). Likewise, husbands are to love and care for their wives, following Christ's example of self-sacrifice of which they are also beneficiaries. They must use their capacities toward their wives' benefit and service for the glory of God.

The apostle Peter also calls husbands toward selflessness when he writes, "Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered" (1 Pet 3:7). Like Paul, Peter points husbands vertically toward the grace and justification they have received from God and calls them to bend these outward toward their wives, as Piper would say. Wayne Grudem remarks that this command means that husbands are to be "positive and affirming" toward their wives,

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[66] Cottrell, *Headship, Submission, and the Bible*, 302–3.

[67] Cottrell, *Headship, Submission, and the Bible*, 302–3.

bestowing honor and understanding on them. The failure to do so results in an interruption to their relationships with God.[68] Grudem concludes from this passage that nurturing a healthy marital covenant is a spiritual endeavor that serves and pleases the Lord.[69] Such nurturance demonstrates both vertical and horizontal covenant-keeping behavior. Husbands who honor God as covenant keepers image the covenant-keeping high priest, Jesus, who sympathizes with the weaknesses of his people (Heb 4:15).

A husband's obedience to Paul's and Peter's commands involves using words that benefit his wife. Just as life and peace have been offered to him through the new covenant, the husband must use language to promote his wife's flourishing and impart peace. Jeff Robinson observes that the gospel empowers believers to use life-giving words: "Because the gospel sets us free from self-love and motivates us to love others, words of grace are intrinsically others-centered because grace is others-centered. God calls us to cultivate humility, which necessarily makes a wide berth for the other person."[70] Husbands who humble themselves and whose hearts are transformed by the gospel are empowered by the Spirit to impart grace to their wives through language.

While Scripture holds husbands in a position of authority and thus in greater responsibility, it does not release wives from the obligation to use life-giving language toward their husbands. Like husbands, women are accountable to the Lord for using gracious words in accordance with God's purposes and for the benefit of their husbands. Proverbs 31 speaks of a woman who does her husband "good and not harm" (v. 12) and who "opens her mouth with wisdom, and kindness is on her tongue" (v. 26). In his first epistle, Peter instructs Christ-following wives to "let [their] adorning be the hidden

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[68] Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 152–53.

[69] Grudem, *1 Peter*, 154.

[70] Jeff Robinson Sr., *Taming the Tongue: How the Gospel Transforms Our Talk* (Austin, TX: The Gospel Coalition, 2021), 66.

person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious" (1 Pet 3:4). He indicates that even unbelieving husbands can be won to Christ without words through respectful and pure conduct (3:1–2). Paul does not intend that women would not speak to their husbands but that their reverent demeanor and conduct toward their husbands, which would also be conveyed through language, would give witness to the authentic power of the gospel even without its vocal articulation.

Paul echoes these sentiments in his letter to Titus, relaying that the behavior of wives toward their families and their self-controlled and pure demeanor—including their submission toward their husbands—are instrumental in keeping the Word of God from being reviled or maligned in the eyes of others (2:3–5). The wife's godliness toward her husband, in word and deed, testifies to the truth of God's Word and his power to transform hearts. Nancy Wolgemuth describes this winsomely:

> Our kindness may be the window through which those around us are enabled to see his beauty. Because kind women—younger and older together—paint an exquisite picture of the gospel. Our lives put on display "the riches of [God's] kindness"—the kindness that "is meant to lead [us] to repentance" (Rom 2:4). The kindness that can bring about true transformation in those who experience it through us.[71]

This understanding of women's witness unto the world spotlights their equal and co-representational role alongside men as image bearers. God's beauty shines through them and points toward his glory.

The above is not to say that a wife should be false in her speech or sin by flattering her husband. Glorifying God through her speech toward him requires both truth and love as commanded in Ephesians 4:15. Elyse Fitzpatrick remarks that a wife's obedience to this verse means learning "to combine both facets of godly speech, truth and

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[71] Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth, *Adorned: Living Out the Beauty of the Gospel Together* (Chicago: Moody, 2017), 327.

love, into communication that brings both light and delight to her husband."[72] She notes that Scripture warns women to avoid gossip and contentious words that cause relational harm and summons them—especially wives toward husbands—to choose words that are pleasant, healthful, graceful, deliberate, wise, kind, and comforting. Because of the consequence levied against Eve and her daughters in Genesis 3:16, such speech stands antithetical to natural tendencies. This contrast between the innate sinful disposition and the Christian wife's life-giving speech and demeanor toward her husband provides the very platform upon which these women bear witness to the power of the gospel, exemplifying the church's heart toward Christ.

As already stated, both spouses are called to adhere to Scripture's one-another commands and to use their capacities, including their linguistic capacity, to nurture the marital covenant. After directing wives and husbands how to treat one another, Peter says this: "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (1 Pet 3:8). While Peter directs these words toward his entire audience, husbands and wives are included in that audience. Putting on these attitudes will shape their demeanor and words toward one another. If their hearts are oriented toward God and one another, words that flow from their hearts will become increasingly merciful and compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, patient, forbearing, and forgiving as the Spirit sanctifies their hearts through the Word. They will seek to respect and honor the dignity of God's image in one another and uphold his moral standards in how they interact with and speak with one another, even as they fail to do so perfectly. Confession, repentance, and forgiveness provide the keys to experiencing greater unity and growth as they endeavor toward greater faithfulness to God's design.

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[72] Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Helper by Design: God's Perfect Plan for Women in Marriage* (Chicago: Moody, 2003), 193–97.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have argued that human language is covenantal in nature and that its life-giving use is integral to establishing, nurturing, and sustaining that covenant to achieve its divine purpose—that of analogically imaging Christ and the church. First, I discussed the covenant of redemption and argued that it is the foundational pre-creation covenant from which all covenants within the created order flow. I described the nature of covenants and considered the different types of covenants presented in Scripture, noting the implications they carried. I also emphasized the concept of *hesed* as the central driving force of covenants among God's people—*hesed* that is first received from God by us and then reciprocated to him in the forms of worship, obedience, and loyalty. I argued that *hesed* is also extended outwardly to others in two dimensions: (1) toward those in specific covenantal relationships, such as in the church and the home, as self-sacrificing love, service, and loyalty, and (2) toward humanity in terms of love, service, and witness. Second, I turned my attention toward the inextricable connection between language and covenant, emphasizing that covenant is dependent upon human language for its establishment, sustenance, and renewal. Third, I narrowed my focus to the covenant of marriage. I presented a biblical definition of marriage and described its essential elements. I noted that it is established and defined through verbal vows and ordained and sealed by God. Fourth, I examined the gospel mission of marriage. Embracing a complementarian perspective, I discussed the analogous nature of marriage and its divine purpose of imaging the covenant of grace between Christ and the church to creation. Based on the teachings of the apostles Paul and Peter, I considered the heart virtues spouses are to embody to one another and how those are to shape the words they speak to one another. In the next chapter, I will turn my attention toward the misuse of language and its potential to do violence to persons and the marital covenant.

CHAPTER 6

MISUSES OF LANGUAGE TOWARD THE DETRIMENT OF PERSONS

In his goodness, God has given language to image bearers as a gift to be used for human flourishing. He did not design language to be exploited as an instrument of oppression. Those who exercise the gift of language in such a way are accountable before God for their words and the harm they inflict. Because marriage is the primary and most intimate covenant between humans, it also provides the context within which the effects of abusive language on one's personhood can be most amplified. Considering the biblical truths about language described in the preceding chapters, the misuse of language to oppress one's spouse must be addressed as egregiously sinful behavior. Applying the previous four chapters to the matter of verbal oppression, we see that such behavior is an abomination that violates the following: (1) the triune God's divine intent for creating language, (2) the personhood of the affected spouse and his or her dignity as an image bearer as well, (3) the moral standards for language as revealed in Scripture, and (4) the very nature and substance of the marital covenant, all of which center on righteous love.[1]

In this chapter, I will argue that when one uses language as a force of violence against his spouse rather than as an instrument of love, he commits violations against God, the dignity and personhood of his spouse, God's moral law given in the sixth and ninth commandments, and the substance of the marital covenant. Furthermore, such verbal violence can detrimentally impact the soul and body of his spouse and the marital

[1] From this point forward, unless otherwise specified, I will use the generic "he" to refer to the oppressor, whether that person is the husband or the wife. I will use "spouse" in reference to the person who is oppressed. The assumption remains that marriage is a covenantal union between one man and one woman. I recognize that many cases exist in which the wife, rather than the husband, is the oppressor. My generic use of the masculine pronoun should be interpreted in these terms.

covenant. First, I will present biblical texts that depict words as instruments of violence. Second, I will discuss the theological, anthropological, moral, and covenantal implications of an individual's use of language to oppress his spouse. Third, I will narrow my focus to verbal oppression within marriage as understood through a complementarian lens. Fourth, I will analyze the anatomy of verbal oppression through an adapted speech-act theoretical lens and propose five illocutionary functions of verbal oppression. I will also discuss potential effects upon both the soul and the body of the hearer.

Biblical Texts Depicting Misused Language as Violence toward Persons

Scripture clearly reveals that words have the potential to cause great harm. In both the Old and New Testaments, warnings and examples abound as to how words can be used as instruments of good or evil. A sampling of proverbs throughout Proverbs 10–29 highlights the direct effects speech can have on others.[2] For example, we read that the godless man *destroys* his neighbor with his mouth (11:9a). We also learn that the mouth of the wicked conceals *violence* (10:6b, 11b) and can overthrow a city (11:11b). Additionally, Proverbs tells us that the "words of the wicked *lie in wait for blood*" (12:6a) and rash words *thrust like swords* (12:18a) or destroy *as a scorching fire* (16:27b). Indeed, both *death* and life are in the power of the tongue (18:21). Such speech flows from a "man with evil intentions: he plans evil and tries to entrap others (12:6; 16:30; 24:2; 26:24–26; 29:5); he *entices* the unsuspecting to destruction (16:29); and he testifies falsely (12:17; 14:5, 25; 25:18)."[3] Far from being neutral or benign, the godless language described in these passages enacts/advances violence as its aim.[4]

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[2] Wendy L. Widder, "The *Peti* and the Power of Speech in Proverbs 1–9," *Old Testament Essays* 35, no. 1 (2022): 126.

[3] Widder, "*Peti* and the Power," 118.

[4] Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Proverbs*, How to Read Series (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 148.

In the book of Psalms, David recounts numerous examples of deep suffering inflicted by his enemies' words. For example, in Psalm 10, we read of one whose "mouth is filled with *cursing* and *deceit* and *oppression*" and under whose "tongue are *mischief* and *iniquity*" (v. 7). In Psalm 27, David mentions false witnesses who "breathe out *violence*" (v. 12b). He also writes of "profane mockers at a feast who *gnash* at [him] with their teeth" (35:16). "They do not speak peace," he adds, "but devise words of deceit" (35:20). He prays for the Lord's deliverance from "lying lips, from a deceitful tongue" (120:2). All too well, David understood the personal impact of malicious language.

This suffering king employs the imagery of weapons to depict the verbal violence he endured. For instance, he condemns Doeg the Edomite who betrayed the house of Ahimelech: "Your tongue plots *destruction*, like a sharp *razor*, you worker of deceit. You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking what is right. You love all words that *devour*, O deceitful tongue" (52:2–4). David laments a former friend, "His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were *drawn swords*" (Ps 55:21). Moreover, David speaks of "the children of man, whose teeth are *spears* and *arrows,* whose tongues are sharp as *swords*" (57:4b). Psalm 59 describes enemies who "bellow with their mouths with *swords* in their lips" (v. 7a). Psalm 64 mentions evildoers who "whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like *arrows*" (64:3). In Psalm 69:4b, David writes of those who would destroy him, who attack him with lies. The impact of his adversaries' taunts was "a deadly wound in [his] bones" (42:10). In his psalms, David frequently depicts words as fearsome weapons capable of great destruction.

David also uses the imagery of wild animals to depict the violent nature of words. In Psalm 58, he laments that the wicked who speak lies have "the venom of a *serpent*" (vv. 3–4a). He compares them to young *lions,* asking God to "break their teeth" and "tear out their fangs" (v. 6). He also mentions evil men who "make their tongue sharp as a *serpent's* and under [whose] lips is the venom of *asps*" (140:3). He prays for the

Lord's deliverance from "lying lips, from a deceitful tongue" (120:2). By these examples, David illustrates that using language to attack people exhibits animal-like violence rather than divine image-bearing behavior. In fact, David's choice to link violent language with serpents and lions suggests satanic features within the use of language to inflict harm.

Further into the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah also references language in violent terms. He prophesied of the men of Judah, "Their tongue is a *deadly arrow*; it speaks deceitfully" (9:8). Having turned away from God to idol worship, Jeremiah's hostile listeners plotted against him, saying, "Come let us *strike him with the tongue*, and let us not pay attention to any of his words" (18:18b). Later in the book, Jeremiah mentions false prophets who used words to deceive and lead others toward God's wrath. God warns against them through Jeremiah: "They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you'" (23:17). While such words initially reassure, they lure the hearer toward destruction. The words of these false prophets echo those of the serpent: "You will not surely die" (Gen 3:4). Clearly, Jeremiah recognizes the power of words to do evil and to lead others toward destruction.

The same dynamics of language and violence are mentioned and exhibited in the New Testament. Jesus revealed that evil is brought forth through the mouth from the evil treasure of the heart (Matt 12:33–37). Such was the case when the Pharisees sought to use language to trap Jesus (Matt 22:15–22, 35–46). Judas infamously used his linguistic capacity to scheme against and ultimately betray Christ (Matt 26:14–16 // Mark 14:10–11 // Luke 22:4–6 // John 18:2). Because of language's destructive power, James refers to the tongue as a small fire capable of setting a great forest ablaze, a world of unrighteousness, an untamable beast, and a restless evil full of deadly poison (3:5–8). Violent language flows from hearts that James describes as filled with bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, from earthly, unspiritual wisdom that is demonic in nature (3:14–15). Similarly, Paul links sinful speech together with anger, wrath, and malice (Col 3:8). To

summarize the words of Jesus, James, and Paul, violent words flow from hearts full of violence.

Beginning with Genesis 3, Scripture reveals that language—designed to be used for God's glory and the good of humankind—can be and has been used toward opposite outcomes. Words can be used as forces of violence—wreaking havoc and destruction on others. Such misuse of language should be understood according to the perspectives presented in previous chapters of this dissertation, as I will demonstrate in the following section.

Theological, Anthropological, Moral, and Covenantal Implications of the Misuse of Language to Oppress

In the previous four chapters, I examined language according to its theological, anthropological, moral, and covenantal natures. I argued that God is the origin and source of language. I asserted that because humanity bears his image, we are to use language in ways that image him and represent him to creation and in ways that function according to his creative design and purposes for language. Additionally, I argued that we must use language in alignment with God's moral law and in accordance with his truth. Finally, I claimed that language is the primary means by which we are empowered to know, love, and live in covenant with one another. The right use of language mimics the ways in which Christ used language and expressed God's heart to others. Used in a Christlike manner, language serves as a conduit by which humanity can live and flourish in harmonious covenant relations with God and others. However, when language is used to oppress others, the implications of such misuse are also theological, anthropological, moral, and covenantal in nature. In other words, there are four dimensions of violation, each of which is entailed in each oppressive utterance. Table 1 provided below illustrates a theological-anthropological-moral-covenantal (TAMC) framework for conceptualizing verbal oppression:

Table 1. TAMC framework for understanding verbal spousal oppression

Theological	**Anthropological**
Because language originates in the triune God who created language as the means by which humans can know, love, and commune with him and one another, humans must exercise great care in how they steward language. Those who misuse language to oppress rather than love and build up their spouse violate God's divine design for language as an agent of knowing, loving, and communing.	As bearers of the divine image, humans are gifted with a godlike linguistic capacity that carries power by which they influence and are influenced by one another. Those who verbally oppress their spouse commit egregious sin by failing to image the God of love rightly, by treating God's image in their spouse as corrupt, and by using language antithetically to the image-bearing functions God mandates to all humanity and which are to flow from love.
Moral	**Covenantal**
As moral agents, humans bear responsibility before God to use language in alignment with his moral standards, as revealed in Scripture, for his glory and according to his purposes. Therefore, those who verbally oppress their spouse violate God's law by using language antithetically to the moral standards revealed in Scripture. Having hearts oriented toward themselves, they use language for their own glory and purposes rather than to fulfill God's commands to love God with their entire being and to love their spouse as themselves.	God created language as the primary vehicle by which to draw humanity into covenant with himself and one another. Since its proper use is integral to forming and sustaining the marital covenant, those who verbally oppress their spouse violate the marital covenant itself. The distorted and self-serving covenantal model they exhibit to creation stands antithetical in nature to the Christ-church covenantal union characterized by self-sacrificial *hesed* love.

In marriage, verbally oppressive speech constitutes sinful violations represented in all four boxes inseparably and simultaneously.

Theological Implications

Because language is theological in nature, its misuse toward the detriment of others carries theological implications. First and foremost, those who use language to oppress fail to recognize and understand the triune God as its source and determiner of its intended use. Because language originates in God and has been gifted to humanity as a godlike capacity to be used in alignment with his loving nature, it is to be regarded with a sense of sobriety and intentionality. Aware of its importance, Jesus warned that "on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak" (Matt 12:36). Indeed, the very existence and power of language reveals something of the communicative nature of the God who created humanity in his image.

Since God is the Creator of language and has generously endowed humanity with the capacity to use it, its first fruits should be directed toward God in worship and obedience. In fact, verbal oppression reveals in the abuser a worship disorder.

Anthropological Implications

Verbal oppression maligns the character of God because the oppressor images not God but Satan through his use of language. Rather than using language to image the God who is love, the oppressor spews hatred and acrimony (Prov 18:6). David writes of such oppressors: "In return for my love, they accuse me . . . they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love" (Ps 109:4a, 5). The oppressor does not use words to image the God of truth and wisdom: he uses language to spew deception and folly. Like Satan's, his words function to deceive or deny God's truth either to or about the object of his oppression. God is generous and kind, but the oppressor uses words to deceive, distort, deny, restrict, and take. God is good and just, but the oppressor uses words for self-gain and injustice. God is gracious and merciful, but the oppressor is neither. He accuses and blame-shifts, just as Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent in Genesis 3:12–13. Satan, however, is the ultimate self-worshiper, and therefore, those who use language to verbally oppress and condemn their spouse image him, not God (1 John 3:5, 8–10).

Zechariah describes a vision of Satan standing before God accusing Joshua (Zech 3:1). The apostle John likewise describes Satan as the accuser of the brothers (Rev 12:10). For this reason, verbal oppressors image Satan rather than God.

Additionally, verbal oppressors seek to diminish the dignity of the image bearer they abuse. As indicated in the previous chapter, such failure amounts to egregious sin against the spouse and against God who has created the spouse in his image. The oppressor is commanded to use language for the flourishing of others, imparting grace to all who hear. God designed his linguistic capacity to affect and shape his spouse constructively, but he chooses to pervert that capacity's function to her detriment. Rather than to love, bless, and build up, he uses language to demand, diminish, mock, curse, deceive, belittle, control, coerce, ridicule, or threaten.

Moral Implications

All language is moral in nature and is either used to serve God and his purposes or self and selfish drives and motives. This understanding prompted David to entreat, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and redeemer" (Ps 19:14). God's chief design purpose of language is love that builds up. Therefore, persons who use language to oppress others commit grievous moral failure (Jas 3:9–10). Using one's linguistic capacity to abuse or oppress others extends beyond mere sinful speech—it aims toward the detriment of others.

The oppressor not only uses his linguistic capacity to serve his own desires and purposes, but he also uses it to coerce his spouse to act in such a way as to satisfy his selfish desires. Having a heart oriented away from God and toward himself is not enough; he demands his spouse's heart be diverted from God toward him as well. The oppressor violates the two greatest commandments: failing to love the Lord God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and failing to love his neighbor as himself (Matt 22:37–40). He

violates the spirit of the sixth and ninth commandments. These violations become evident by reading beyond the letter of the law to the heart of it, just as Christ exemplifies regarding the sixth and seventh commandments in Matthew 5:21–24 and 27–30. There, Jesus describes the very passions underlying specific sinful acts as violations of the commandments in themselves. Adherence to the commandments entails putting off anger, for example, and intentionally pursuing unity, or putting off anything that promotes lust in order to embody fidelity. The Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) demonstrates such reasoning.[5] It expounds upon the sixth and ninth commandments as follows.

According to the WLC, fulfillment of the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder" (Exod 20:13), extends far beyond refraining from the act of murder:

> The duties required in the Sixth Commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defense thereof against violence, patient bearing of the hand of God, quietness of mind, cheerfulness of spirit; a sober use of meat, drink, physic, sleep, labor, and recreations; by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild and courteous speeches and behavior; forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succoring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent.[6]

The negative imperative, "do not commit murder," carries positive imperatives along with it. The "putting off" of murder, for God's people, does not suffice. Rather, it entails the putting on of love, meekness, kindness, compassion, gentleness, forbearance,

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[5] While scholars disagree on whether one can extrapolate the detailed duties in the WLC's treatment of the sixth and ninth commandments from the authorial intent of the commands, I concur with the PCA, who argues from the WLC that verbal abuse violates the sixth and ninth commandments. See *Supplement (2022) to the Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault to the 49th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (2019–2022)* (presented at the 49th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, Birmingham, Alabama, June 2022), 2311–12, https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2301-AIC-on-Domestic-Abuse-Updated.pdf.

[6] See WLC, Question 135: "What are the duties required in the sixth commandment?" The Westminster Larger Catechism can be accessed online at http://thewestminsterstandards.com/westminster-larger-catechism/. For the sake of clarity, I have omitted from this and all subsequent WLC quotations all in-text scriptural citations included in the source.

forgiveness, longsuffering, and other aspects of the love God demonstrates to them. By the spirit of the law and according to Jesus's teaching in Matthew 5:21–22, the verbally oppressive person stands guilty of breaking the sixth commandment.

As with the sixth commandment, adherence to the ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod 20:16), involves more than what appears on the surface. The WLC offers the following:

> The duties required in the Ninth Commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocency; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requires; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of: Whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.[7]

In this case, fulfillment of the negative imperative against bearing false witness carries with it the positive imperatives requiring God's people to hold others in charitable and kind regard, loving and valuing their good name and being reticent to believe, let alone give, any evil report regarding them. Likewise, they are to grieve over, not delight in, the weaknesses or failures of others. By the spirit of this law, the verbally oppressive person stands guilty of violating the ninth commandment.

Covenantal Implications

In far too many marriages, one or both spouses' use of language undermines and erodes the covenantal bonds that it is meant to nourish and protect. In these cases, language functions in such a way as to prohibit or disrupt shalom and flourishing, rather than to promote them. By using language as a weapon to oppress, a person violates the covenant. David provides an example of this in Psalm 55 when he agonizes over the

[7] See WLC, Question 144: "What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?"

covenant-breaking words of a formerly close companion:

> For it is not an enemy who taunts me—then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. . . . My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated covenant. His speech was smooth as butter, yet war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords (vv. 12–13, 20–21).

While David laments the betrayal, not of a spouse in this case but of a companion, he clarifies that through words, people can violate their covenantal bonds.[8] In doing so, they inflict injury upon the one with whom they are in covenant because any action that detrimentally impacts the covenant likewise impacts the persons within it. David would not have lamented the taunts and insolence of a stranger or mere acquaintance. His companion's betrayal causes him anguish because of the intimate nature of their former friendship. The friend whom he trusted and loved now wages war against him. Rupture has been inflicted upon the covenant.

Scripture exhibits such covenantal violation in its account of David and his wife Michal. In 1 Samuel 18, we learn Michal loved David, and Saul offered her to him in marriage for the price of one hundred Philistine foreskins—a price Saul expected would get David killed (vv. 20–25). David delivered the "bride price" (v. 27), indicating his desire to marry her—a point that is reinforced when he cared enough about her to demand her release from Paltiel, to whom Saul gave her instead (2 Sam 3:13–16).[9] Yet, three chapters following the account of her retrieval, Michal contemptuously ridiculed David for his near-naked dancing before the Lord, attributing his fervor to shameless vulgarity rather than a worshipful response to Yahweh (2 Sam 6:20). Her sharp words earned David's retort and a lifelong consequence of childlessness (2 Sam 6:21–23).

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[8] The terms "companion" and "familiar friend" parallel those used in Proverbs 2:17 and Malachi 2:14, which reference marriage partners.

[9] Joyce Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 8 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 225.

Previously, Michal's loyalty had lain with David to the point that she had saved him from being killed by Saul (1 Sam 19:11–17). However, Scripture's three references to her in 2 Samuel 6 as the "daughter of Saul" (vv. 16, 20, and 23) suggest that her loyalty no longer lay with David but with her father's blood lineage, which she was subsequently cut off from continuing. It is Bathsheba, not Michal, who delivers David's royal heir (2 Sam 12:24). Michal disappeared from the Davidic narrative altogether following her verbal scorn of David.

Underneath the surface of verbal oppression lies an insidious depersonalization of the other and a denial of the covenantal unity. In other words, one spouse relates to the other as an "it" to be used rather than as a "thou" to be known and understood in shared reality. Existential philosopher Martin Buber eloquently describes this dynamic:

> The *I* of the primary word *I–It* makes its appearance as individuality and becomes conscious of itself as subject (of experiencing and using). The *I* of the primary word *I–Thou* makes its appearance as person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity (without a dependent genitive). Individuality makes its appearance by being differentiated from other individualities. A person makes his appearance by entering into relation with other persons. The one is the spiritual form of natural detachment, the other the spiritual form of natural solidarity of connection. The aim of self-differentiation is to experience and to use . . . . The aim of relation is relation's own being, that is, contact with the *Thou*.[10]

An appropriate application of Buber's observation to verbal oppression lies in recognizing that the oppressor dehumanizes not only his spouse but also himself, for one's personhood arises and flourishes not in his distinction as an individual, as though he could exist outside of relational connection, but in his relation to another. Such depersonalization can detrimentally impact few human relationships quite so significantly as it can the covenantal union between a husband and a wife.

Because language is theological, anthropological, moral, and covenantal in nature, its misuse carries implications within all four categories, as discussed in this

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[10] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2010), 71.

section. Because marriage is the most primary, intimate human covenant, it is especially vulnerable to harmful words.

A Perspective of Verbal Oppression within Complementarian Marriage

As referenced earlier in this dissertation, a complementarian perspective of marriage views husbands and wives as equal in worth as image bearers and co-heirs of grace (Gen 1:27; 1 Pet 3:7) while delegating differing positions and roles to them. Husbands are viewed as holding positions of headship and authority while women are called to respect their husbands and submit to them (Eph 5:22–33). As I discussed previously, Scripture requires husbands to model authority and headship as exemplified by Christ toward the church. Conversely, wives are called to model the example of the church (Eph 5:24). By fulfilling these commands well, husbands and wives together testify of the glorious covenant between Christ and the church. Each role carries tremendous responsibility, and neither lacks limitation. Importantly, *both* spouses are called to obey the one-another commands directed toward all believers in how they live and communicate with one another, and, in addition, to obey the specific instructions Scripture gives to husbands and wives, respectively.

Irrespective of gender roles in marriage, Paul instructs all believers to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [they] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:1–3). Paul adds,

> Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph 4:31–5:2).

Severing the one-another commands in Ephesians 4:1–3 and 4:31–5:2 from the complementarian model of marriage can lead readers to a distorted view of Christ and the

church. Rather, both husbands and wives are to imitate God as his beloved children. Scriptural commands given specifically to husbands and wives must be understood as extensions to the one-another commands, not replacements of them.

The WLC discusses delegated positions of headship and subordination in terms of superiors and inferiors. This does not imply inequality but rather positional roles.[11] According to Timothy LeCroy et al., the WLC's exegetical perspective of superiors and inferiors carries implications for how complementarians should address the matter of oppression.[12] Husbands, holding positions of authority, are prohibited from the following:

> . . . an inordinate seeking of themselves, their own glory, ease, profit, or pleasure; commanding things unlawful, or not in the power of inferiors to perform; counseling, encouraging, or favoring them in that which is evil; dissuading, discouraging, or discountenancing them in that which is good; correcting them unduly; careless exposing, or leaving them to wrong, temptation, and danger; provoking them to wrath, or any way dishonoring themselves, or lessening their authority, by an unjust, indiscreet, rigorous, or remis behavior.[13]

At the same time, according to the WLC, husbands are required to do such things as love, pray for, protect, instruct, counsel, and commend or reprove them as appropriate according to God's Word. Additionally, they are to "provide for them all things necessary for soul and body: and by grave, wise, holy, and exemplary carriage, to procure glory to God, honor to themselves, and so to preserve that authority which God has put upon them."[14]

Based on Scripture, the WLC also addresses the demeanor and behavior wives should demonstrate toward their husbands. They should show "reverence in heart, word, and behavior" for their husbands and pray for them with thanksgiving. Additionally, they

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[11] The matter of gender equality is implied in the Westminster Catechism response to question 17, "How did God create man?"

[12] *Supplement (2022) to the Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault*, 2311–12.

[13] See WLC, Question 130: "What are the sins of superiors?"

[14] See WLC, Question 129: "What is required of superiors toward their inferiors?"

are called to honor them, submit to them, bear with their weaknesses, and cover them in love.[15] They should not show contempt for their husband nor rebellion against their husbands' leadership unless it violates Scripture—nor should they curse, mock, or cause shame to their husbands.[16]

Husbands and Verbal Oppression

While all abusive language is sinful in nature, the misuse of language by husbands to oppress their wives carries particular gravity. Such verbal oppression, like all forms of spousal oppression, perverts the biblical model of covenantal sacrificial love. The oppressor instead uses his linguistic capacity for self-serving purposes at his spouse's expense and sacrifice. In the Old Testament, such perversion appears when Abraham—at that point Abram—took his wife Sarai to Egypt to escape famine. Fearing the Egyptians would kill him and steal his beautiful wife, Abraham beseeched Sarah to lie so his life would be spared—allegedly for her sake (Gen 12:10–13). Having already admitted that she would not be harmed if she told the truth, Abraham clearly sought to protect not his wife but himself. He pursued his own well-being at her sacrifice, though God had already promised to make him a great nation (Gen 12:1–3). Because Abraham did not trust God's promise, he asked his wife to tell a lie that resulted in her own subjugation to Pharaoh. There is no mention in the passage that God kept Pharaoh from knowing her intimately as he did in the case of Abimelech (Gen 20:4–6). Pharaoh explicitly stated that because of Abraham's deception, he took Sarah for his wife (12:19). Pharaoh's two uses of the word *mâ* (why) in verses 18 and 19 suggest Abraham's fears were unfounded. Nonetheless, Abraham repeats his sin against Sarah, this time with Abimelech, a few chapters further into the narrative. In Abimelech's case, Abraham lied again by saying Sarah was his

[15] I have omitted the immense number of in-text scriptural citations presented in this quote. See WLC, Question 127, "What is the honor that inferiors owe to their superiors?"

[16] As with the previous sentence, I have omitted in-text scriptural citations. The list is available in WLC, Question 128: "What are the sins of inferiors against their superiors?"

sister and coerced her to say he was her brother (Gen 20:1–2, 5, 11–13). Scripture reveals that Abraham told Sarah she *must* demonstrate *hesed* by giving herself up for his wellbeing—the person of inferior position for the person of superior position—directly implying that she would violate covenant faithfulness if she did not comply (v. 13). He offered his wife, body and soul, to Abimelech as he had to Pharaoh for the sake of his own survival, even though God's promise ensured his survival.

Abraham's perversion of the covenantal model reverses and distorts in the strongest terms the image that God designed marriage to portray—that of the covenant between Christ and the church. Of course, Abraham's marriage preceded the incarnation by thousands of years. However, humanity had already experienced God's covenantal *hesed* from creation, and Abraham was accountable to God for extending that same *hesed* to his household, including Sarah. In the patriarchal system of the ANE, those in authority were expected to be devoted to the welfare, flourishing, and peace of those under their authority. This applied to male heads of households as much as to kings.[17] The self-giving and other-protecting (rather than self-serving and self-protecting) expectations were well established by God as the covenantal norm even before he formed a covenant with Abraham. The divine covenantal thread runs through each generation leading to Abraham, especially with Adam and Eve then Noah. This understanding would not end with the Old Testament but would carry into the New Testament.

Ephesians 5:25–33

As stated earlier, Paul prefaces the household codes presented in Ephesians 5 and 6 with one-another commands in Ephesians 4:1–3 and 4:32–5:2. In Ephesians 5:25–

[17] I am grateful to Greg Smith for his insight on the link between God's *hesed* toward humanity, the duty of kings to demonstrate *hesed* to those under their rule, and the duty of the paterfamilias to, in turn, demonstrate *hesed* to those under their authority. Greg Smith, "Survey of Genesis" (unpublished class notes for OLDTS 3063, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Spring Semester, 2017); also Greg Smith, interview by author, Zoom, June 18, 2020. See also Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 33.

33, Paul instructs husbands as follows:

> Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each of you love his wife as himself, and let his wife see that she respects her husband.

Paul's connection between Christ's example of loving sacrifice for the church and the husband's manner of headship in Ephesians 5 merits emphasis. Nothing could be less Christlike than subjugating and oppressing the person whom one is covenantally bound to love and to serve by forsaking his own interests for hers (Matt 20:28 // Mark 10:45; John 13:1–17). In other words, a Pauline perspective of a husband's role also entails love, sacrifice, and servanthood as essential elements of headship. Authority is used for the benefit of wives rather than at their expense.

In his commentary on Ephesians, Benjamin Merkle makes the observation that Paul's linking the husband's role with that of Christ refutes any notion that he condones spousal oppression.[18] Christ exhibited self-sacrificial faithfulness to his bride to the point of suffering and death; in stark contrast, abusers demand that their victims suffer for them. Whereas Christ's objective is to nurture and build up his bride and present her pure and without blemish, abusers work to tear down those whom the Lord has created. Christ bent low to become flesh among men. Conversely, abusers raise themselves up as lords over their victims. Abusers stand in opposition to the concept of covenantal *hesed*—they are without lovingkindness, tenderness, compassion, trustworthiness, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. They defy God's command to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God (Mic 6:8).

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[18] Benjamin L. Merkle, *Ephesians*, EGGNT (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 187.

1 Peter 3:7

Like Paul, Peter discusses how husbands should treat their wives. He instructs husbands: "Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered." He then calls upon all believers to "have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (3:8). Subsequently, he references Psalm 34:12–16, which includes a command to keep one's tongue from evil and lips from speaking deceit (1 Pet 3:10b).

Incompatibility of Verbal Oppression with the Role of a Husband

God continues to hold husbands accountable to the instructions found in Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3. Husbands who reject those instructions and demonstrate abusive patterns in the name of headship align more with ancient pagans than with Christianity.[19] Jeremy Pierre argues from Matthew 20:25–28 that such patterns go so far as to exhibit a satanic use of authority. He argues,

> When a man's authority is not derived from God's self-emptying authority, it is always twisted into something satanic. Men will use their physical strength to intimidate or outright assault women and children. They will manipulate by withholding affection or provision to get what they want out of those under their care. No matter how sinister what they're wanting is, their warped sense of entitlement justifies it. They use their authority not to serve but to be served in sick ways. . . . God hates this mockery of his authority, where men are given authority for the purpose of giving of themselves for those under their care but instead use it to please themselves.[20]

The oppressive individual uses his authority and, subsequently, his linguistic capacities toward the diminishment of his spouse to bring her under his subjugation and control.

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[19] Walter Liefeld, *Ephesians*, IVPNTC 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

[20] Jeremy Pierre, "An Overlooked Help: Church Discipline and the Protection of Women," *JBMW* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 13.

Scripture calls regenerate husbands to exercise authority not by coercion but in a spirit of grace, motivated by love.[21]

Because words serve as outward manifestations of the heart, husbands whose hearts are oriented toward their own purposes and gratification rather than toward God's purposes and their wives' flourishing will speak words that display that orientation (Matt 12:34; Luke 6:45). In other words, their hearts serve as the founts from which language will be misused and abused. Such words work to sow discord, distrust, sorrow, despair, confusion, doubt, or some mixture of these or other effects. James grounds these in selfish passions, desires, and covetousness (Jas 4:1–3). In all cases in which husbands verbally oppress their wives, the complementarian model of marriage is violated.

Wives and Verbal Abuse

While wives are traditionally viewed as more vulnerable to spousal abuse, in many cases, it is the wife rather than the husband who uses language abusively. In addition to the scriptural passages already mentioned pertaining to how God's people are to speak to one another, several passages of Scripture instruct wives specifically as to the attitudes and demeanor they should hold toward their husbands. These attitudes will instruct and guide the way they speak to their husbands.

Ephesians 5:22–24, 33b

Paul instructs wives to submit to their husbands "as to the Lord."[22] A wife is to follow the example of the church and also to respect her husband. John Stott likens this to grateful acceptance of her husband's care, the manner of which stood in stark contrast to

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[21] Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), chap. 3, "No Longer Two but One: Marriage in the New Testament," sec. 7, "The Roles of Husbands and Wives," para. 3, Kindle.

[22] The one-another commands presented in Ephesians 4:1–3 apply to all believers, male and female, married or single.

what was typical in the surrounding culture.[23] Reverence, respect, and gratitude should then characterize the speech as well as the behavior of Christian wives.

Titus 2:3–5

Paul directs Titus to ensure that the older women exhibit reverence and avoid slander and too much wine. Additionally, they are to train younger women to "love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled." Robert Yarbrough notes Paul's continual emphasis on speech, adding that throughout Scripture, "speech ethics are a central canonical concern for the people of God."[24] Paul's instruction to Titus is no exception. Wives who are believers are to demonstrate reverence in speech and not use it to tear down others in any relationship, and certainly not within their covenant of marriage.[25]

1 Peter 3:1–5

Peter instructs wives to be subject to their husbands so "that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives" in light of her "pure and respectful conduct." Additionally, she should have a "gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is precious," and be submitted to her husband. It is through her words and demeanor that the believing wife's inner nature is made visible.[26] Paul makes it clear that by a wife's reverent spirit and conduct toward her husband, which are incompatible with harshness of speech, God is pleased and an unbelieving

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[23] John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 225–26.

[24] Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2018), 511.

[25] Yarbrough, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 511.

[26] Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 148.

husband may be drawn to the faith. In all cases in which wives verbally oppress their husbands, the complementarian perspective of marriage is violated.

Speech-Act Theory Applied: An Anatomy of Verbal Oppression in Marriage

As introduced in chapter 3 of this dissertation, God designed humans with the ability to influence and shape one another through language. Based on the works of J. L. Austin and John Searle, I concurred that speech constitutes acts that include three essential elements: locution, illocution, and perlocution. Locution entails the utterance itself. Illocution references the speaker's intent. Perlocution comprises the hearer's response. I propose that speech-act theory should be applied to verbal oppression in marriage, demonstrating that utterances can carry oppressive functions that may result in a range of effects upon the spouse. I suggest the following adapted model of speech-act theory, emphasizing that because language is action, counselors should evaluate utterances spoken within marriage, the functions of those utterances, and their potential or experienced impact upon the spouse.

Utterances

As established earlier, a speaker's locution is simply the utterance spoken. At its core, however, an utterance is far from simple—it is a *creative* act. The speaker forms ideas into utterances and thrusts into existence his analogical versions of "Let there be." While he lacks God's omnipotence, he combines godlike intellectual and linguistic capacities to act upon the world and others around him to elicit desired responses or ends. His inner being (cognition, affect, and volition) manifests in the form of words he combines effortlessly into sentences that may have never been uttered in precisely the same way before and may never be again.[27] He does so with little, if any, awareness of

[27] In part, John Searle argues that this aspect of compositionality sets humanity apart from animals. See John Searle, "Philosophy of Language, Lecture 1," University of California-Berkeley, October 25, 2011, YouTube video, 31:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uk5pIzCNOzU.

the creative process taking place at lightning speed. This act is theological because it is analogous to God's creative and sustaining Word. It is anthropological because it connects the inner and outer man of the speaker with the same of the hearer, initiating or continuing a dialogue designed to shape both parties. Each is designed to represent God to creation, and each utterance is a primary means toward that achievement. The act is moral because it is oriented either toward God and his purposes or toward self and selfish motives—or some mix thereof. It is covenantal because it carries the power to bring persons closer to or further away from one another and to draw near to or retain distance from God, in submission to or rejection of the creation or new covenant.

Functions

The illocutionary aspect of communication entails the act of the speaker upon the hearer—what action he performs with his words, such as to direct, to commit, to assert, to declare, or to express. Every meaningful utterance is driven by the speaker's beliefs, values, and will: through words, he *intentionally* acts upon others and the world around him according to his belief system, values, and desires. Rather than using language as a vehicle of love that builds up, an oppressor uses words to elicit a response that will primarily satisfy himself rather than God and serve himself rather than his spouse. While there is a plethora of acts he may commit through his use of language, I have composed the following five functional illocutionary categories of oppressive speech: (1) dominate, (2) diminish (3) deceive, (4) destabilize, and (5) dethrone. These categories overlap, and each is often used in conjunction with one or more others.

(1) *Dominate*. This function involves a spouse's use of speech to coerce, control, restrict, manipulate, or in some way to impose his will unreasonably upon his spouse in such a way as to inhibit or restrict her from exercising her God-given agency. Evan Stark describes such action as "an offense to liberty" that seeks to prevent the oppressed person "from freely developing their personhood, utilizing their capacities, or

practicing citizenship, consequences they experience as *entrapment*."[28] Such oppressors ignore their spouses' equality as image bearers and co-recipients of the cultural mandate presented in Genesis 1:26–28. Instead, they treat their spouses as inferior appendages who exist to serve their interests.

(2) *Diminish*. This category entails the use of speech to belittle, criticize, ridicule, mock, curse, and dehumanize. The oppressive party expresses a diminished view of his spouse and verbally acts to convince her, and sometimes others, to share that diminished view. An oppressor might engage in verbal assaults in front of the children in order to triangulate them against her, elevate their view of him, and diminish their view of his wife. Again, such spouses fail to recognize and honor the dignity of the oppressed spouse as a bearer of the divine image whose worth is established by God.

(3) *Deceive*. The third category describes the ways in which an oppressive spouse distorts or denies the truth to control his spouse or to shape narratives to suit his own purposes. Such behaviors include blame-shifting, gaslighting, accusing, lying, and enticing to sin. For example, by blame-shifting, a spouse denies responsibility for his own actions and falsely attributes responsibility to his spouse. Gaslighting, on the other hand, involves a person distorting or denying reality to cause his spouse to question the accuracy of her perceptions and senses. Inaccurately accusing one's spouse of wrongdoing is another form of deceptive speech. However, even when a spouse ungraciously but accurately accuses his spouse of sinful behavior, there exists an element of falsehood in his failure to look upon her through the lens of justification and to approach her sin as God approaches it. Just like Satan accuses Joshua in Zechariah 3:1, the oppressor denies the love, grace, and mercy of God toward his spouse, and he does so through words. Vern Poythress writes, "It seems natural that people who have become

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[28] Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, Interpersonal Violence Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 22.

captive to the kingdom of Satan, and whose minds have been deceived by his deceit, would often spew out that deceit from their own mouths. They become mouthpieces for Satan. . . . The power of language—originally a good gift from God—becomes twisted to evil."[29] Their words function toward detriment and serve the purposes of the father of lies (John 8:44).

While lying is an obvious form of deceptive speech, enticing one's spouse toward sin should also be included in the category of deception. By enticing, the oppressor echoes the words of the serpent who questions God's command and assures Eve she will not suffer the consequences disobedience would bring (Gen 3:1–4). Scripture condemns such enticement, especially in cases in which the enticer holds a position of authority over the other. For example, God cut Jeroboam and his lineage off from the face of the earth for causing the people of Israel to worship idols under a false religious system (1 Kgs 12:28–33, 25–30; 15:25–28). God subsequently did the same to each king who "walked in the way of Jeroboam" (e.g., Baasha, 1 Kgs 15:33–16:14; Zimri, 1 Kgs 15–20; Omri, 1 Kgs 16:21–28). According to Jesus, it would be better for such enticers to be drowned in the sea with their necks fastened to great millstones (Matt 18:6).

(4) *Destabilize.* The fourth category involves words intended to cause one's spouse to feel insecure, unsafe, threatened, intimidated, or discouraged. This use of language interferes with the spouse's experience of *shalom*, which God intends to be enjoyed within the home and which did exist prior to the fall. Jesus declared to his followers, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14:27a). An oppressive spouse who uses destabilizing language works to strip away peace. For example, a husband may threaten to harm his wife, children, or even a pet. He might threaten to take

[29] Vern Sheridan Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language, a God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 109–10.

away possessions or opportunities his wife values if she does not act in accordance with his wishes. He may use his language and tone in such a way as to intimidate and keep his wife ever cognizant of his ability to make her life unpleasant. At its heart, destabilizing speech represents the most satanic form of domination. The oppressor twists Deuteronomy 30:15–20 in such a way as to place himself in charge of blessing or curse or life or death. To experience momentary peace requires fulfilling his selfish desires and demands. To fail to meet his expectations garners instability and harm.

To be clear, all forms of spousal oppression disrupt peace in the marriage, but threats of harm or loss aim specifically toward that disruption. Often, such oppressors allow their language and behavior toward their spouse to be dictated by their moods, speaking endearingly when they are in a good mood but turning to abusive speech when the mood passes. Such swings have a destabilizing effect because the oppressed learn that they cannot predict when the oppressors will or will not speak peacefully. Even when oppressive spouses speak well, those whose spouses use speech to destabilize have to remain vigilant for shifts in attitude and behavior.

Discouragement also functions in a potentially destabilizing manner when an oppressor attempts to cast doubt on God's promises or faithfulness toward his spouse. We read of such a dynamic in Psalm 42:3: "My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?'" These sons of Korah beseech God in verse 9, "Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" In verse 10, they add, "As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, 'Where is your God?'" Those who use language to discourage their spouses work to shift their spouses' confidence away from the faithfulness of God and his providence.

(5) *Dethrone*. The fifth and final category entails the ultimate function of verbal oppression, which is to dethrone and usurp God's rule and authority over his spouse. Because his worship is oriented toward himself, the verbal oppressor defies

Romans 12:1 by demanding that his spouse's life be a living sacrifice unto *him* rather than unto God. Pharaoh provides an example of such dethronement when he rebuffs Moses's and Aaron's request to take the Israelites into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to their God: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? . . . Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens" (Exod 5:2, 4). While Pharaoh's example serves as a more blatant example than might be typically expressed, the demand for primary allegiance is the same.

Some persons might errantly condone an oppressive husband's selfish use of authority as somehow allowable considering Scripture's command that wives should submit to their husbands "as is fitting in the Lord" (Col 3:18). This perspective could not be more contradictory to the teaching of Scripture. One must consider the next verse in Colossians 3, which commands husbands to love their wives and not be harsh with them (v. 19). Peter likewise instructs husbands to "live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel . . . that your prayers may not be hindered" (1 Pet 3:7), therein linking a husband's mistreatment of his wife with a disruption in his vertical relationship with God. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul instructs husbands to love their wives and to lay themselves down for them (Eph 5:25). They are to follow the example of the "Son of Man who did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matt 20:28 // Mark 10:45). Jesus described himself as gentle and lowly at heart, not harsh and demanding (Matt 11:29). He invites the weary, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28–30). Christ offers rest, not domination.

Instead of following Christ's example, the oppressive husband calls his wife to love him and to lay herself down for *him*. He exhorts her to meet his *selfish* demands rather than to use her image-bearing capacities to serve God's purposes. Like Satan, he attempts to raise himself up beside God and push his wife down in the process. He, a

mere creature, takes on the role of a harsh master. He acts in stark contrast to the Son of God, who "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant" (Phil 2:6–7).

Paul exposes this contrast in his lengthy exhortation found in Ephesians 5:25–33a. Pointing to Christ's love, care, and sacrifice for the church, Paul underscores that in the same manner, husbands are to love their wives, showing the same care and attention they show to their own bodies. Paul turns his focus back toward wives and instructs that each should "see that she respects her husband" (Eph 5:33b), but he does so after expounding upon husbands' responsibility to love their wives. According to Glenn Graham, Paul herein demonstrates "his hope that, in consequence of the husband loving his wife after the pattern of Christ's love for the church," she will fear her husband—not in a sense of fright but rather a sense of reverence and great respect.[30] Paul emphasizes that the husband is to love his wife constantly as his own body because the two have been joined together as one flesh (vv. 28–29).[31]

Just as speech-act theory associates linguistic function with intentional action, I argue that oppressive language can be categorized into the aforementioned five functions by which the oppressor intentionally and detrimentally acts upon his spouse.

A Word about Silent Oppression

One pattern commonly observed in marriages characterized by verbal oppression is the use of silence to punish one's spouse for perceived infractions against him, sometimes for days or weeks at a time. This, too, demonstrates a form of verbal oppression: the oppressor withholds words as a force of punishment or control. By his silence, he ignores such passages as Ephesians 5:19, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, and Hebrews

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[30] Glenn Graham, *An Exegetical Summary of Ephesians*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2008), 513.

[31] Graham, *Exegetical Summary of Ephesians*, 512–13.

10:24–25. Through sinful omission, he says, "Your existence does not matter to me. I am indifferent to you." He may demonstrate exaggerated affection and attention toward other family members while pretending his spouse is not present. Leslie Vernick suggests such indifference, not hate, exemplifies the opposite of love: "Indifference says I don't care enough about you to give you my time, my energy, or other resources to show interest, care, or love toward you. . . . Indifference says you are not a person to love, but an object to use. . . . Indifference says that you exist for my benefit and when you don't please me or benefit me anymore, you are replaceable or disposable."[32] In other words, one's silence toward his spouse may function to diminish her as severely, or even more so, than diminishing words, because he denies her very existence.

Just as speech-act theory associates linguistic function with intentional action, I argue that oppressive language can be categorized into the aforementioned five functions by which the oppressor intentionally and detrimentally acts upon his spouse. While an oppressor lacks the capability to control effects, counselors and ministry leaders should exercise vigilance regarding the potential effects of language on the soul and body of the sufferer.

Potential Effects

The perlocutionary aspect of speech-act theory entails the responsive effect of an utterance upon the hearer. Foundational to the concept of perlocution is the acknowledgment that by making an utterance, a speaker intentionally performs an action by which he seeks to effect some form of response from his hearer. Early Romantic poet Letitia Elizabeth Landon captures the power and potential effects of human utterances vividly:

Tis a strange mystery, the power of words!

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[32] Leslie Vernick, *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage: How to Find Your Voice and Reclaim Your Hope* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2013), 54, Kindle.

Life is in them, and death. A word can send
The crimson colour hurrying to the cheek,
Hurrying with many meanings; or can turn
The current cold and deadly to the heart.
Anger and fear are in them; grief and joy
Are on their sound; yet slight, impalpable:–
A word is but a breath of passing air.[33]

The poet concurs with Scripture's clear teaching that people's words hold tremendous power to impact and affect others. The human tongue, as I have emphasized, can be an instrument of healing or violence. Those who misuse language to dominate, diminish, deceive, or destabilize their spouses and/or to dethrone their spouses' primary allegiance to God's authority can impact them in a variety of harmful ways. Because humans are created bipartite beings consisting of a material body and immaterial soul, words carry the power to cause painful, even traumatic, effects to both.[34] In fact, Scripture provides an example of such soul and body affliction in the cries of David found in Psalm 109:

> [W]icked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. They encircle me with words of hate, and attack me without cause. In return for my love they accuse me, but I give myself to prayer. So they reward me evil for good, hatred for my love. . . . He loved to curse; let curses come upon him! He did not delight in blessing; may it be far from him! He clothed himself with cursing as his coat; may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones! . . . For I am poor and needy, and my heart is stricken within me. I am gone like a shadow at evening; I am shaken off like a locust. My knees are weak through fasting; my body has become gaunt, with no fat. I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they wag their heads (vv. 1–5; 17–18; 22–25).

David's misery was such that he did not eat. Both his inner and outer man suffer affliction. He cries out in anguish to the God who alone can save him from those who condemn his soul to death (v. 31). Because language is transmitted directly from the heart

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[33] Letitia Elizabeth Landon, "The Power of Words," in vol. 3 of *Ethel Churchill: or, The Two Brides* (London: Henry Colburn, 1837).

[34] While the topic of trauma is a matter of current debate within the field of biblical counseling, I will not endeavor to parse between experienced pain and experienced trauma in this dissertation, as that is a matter of subjectivity and beyond the scope of my research. Regardless of the degree or extent to which sinful behavior has led to experienced detrimental effects, biblical counselors and pastoral leaders have a responsibility to comfort the oppressed. The point of this sentence is that sinful language carries the potential to detrimentally impact both the soul and body of the image bearer against whom it is aimed.

of the speaker to the heart of the listener, words first impact the soul. By affecting the soul for good or for harm, the effects of words can also be manifested in the body of the recipient.

Potential Impact upon the Soul

When one who has entered into marital covenant turns against the other to do violence, that person—without raising a hand against the other—can cause great suffering. While sticks and stones indeed break bones, words can and do crush spirits. Those whose spouses use words to dominate them may experience feelings of helplessness, despair, frustration, or resignation. A perceived loss of agency or diminished capacity may provoke some to become frustrated, withdrawn, or apathetic. Those whose spouses use language in ways that diminish their personhood and dignity as image bearers may experience shame, rejection, numbness, humiliation, sorrow, or despair. Many will question their very identity, whether that be their created identity as a bearer of God's image or redemptive identity as one who has been saved by grace. Those whose spouses use speech deceptively may learn to doubt their own sensory perception and intellectual capacities. They might believe they rightly deserve blame and accusation for wrongs they did not commit. Conversely, they may also feel helpless against the oppressor's pressure to engage in behavior they know to be sinful. Persons whose spouses use language to destabilize may experience anxiety, intimidation, fear, depression, insecurity, discouragement, hopelessness, despair, desire for control, or feelings of panic. As oppressors use speech in ways that displace God's reign over their spouses' lives, their spouses may experience feelings of resignation, despair, dividedness, frustration, anguish, or even a sense of being forgotten by God. These categories overlap, and emotional responses may vary according to the individual.

Such was the experience of the psalmist who wrote Psalm 102: "My heart is struck down like grass and has withered; I forget to eat my bread. Because of my loud

groaning my bones cling to my flesh. . . . All the day my enemies taunt me; those who deride me use my name for a curse'" (vv. 4–5, 8). Many psalms identify the name of the author in the superscript, but Psalm 102 remarkably describes the author's state instead: "A prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the Lord." This anonymous psalmist expresses anguish of soul due to taunts and derision. Few, if any, scholars would question the power of words to inflict deep emotional pain. The ramifications of such pain on physical health should also be considered.

Potential Impact upon the Body

The intricacy of body-and-soul human design means that even forms of abuse that on the surface seem non-physical carry the potential to detrimentally affect one's physical health. For example, a study published by the National Institutes of Health suggests that prolonged exposure to stressors such as maltreatment is linked to adverse physiological responses within the cardiovascular, respiratory, gastrointestinal, musculoskeletal, immune, and reproductive systems.[35] Physiological responses to stressors are part of God's good design to help humans respond appropriately to life-threatening circumstances. However, chronic exposure to stressors results in prolonged physiological responses that can lead to a variety of adverse medical conditions. According to physician Gabor Maté, such responses may include even life-threatening conditions. He argues that "psychological influences make a decisive biological contribution to the onset of malignant disease" through the interconnectivity of the endocrine system, the immune system, and the areas of the brain that perceive and process emotion.[36] Worth reiteration is the fact that such physiological effects require no

[35] Brianna Chu et al., "Physiology, Stress Reaction," National Library of Medicine: National Center for Biotechnology Information, last modified January 2024, http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK541120/.

[36] Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No: Understanding the Stress-Disease Connection* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 132, Everand.

outwardly physical force of violence.

The fact that harsh treatment or the mere threat of physical harm can adversely impact the body should not surprise any Bible reader. Proverbs 17:22 asserts that "a crushed spirit dries up the bones." David exemplifies this soul-body connection when he cries, "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also" (Ps 31:9). Luke describes Jesus in Gethsemane as being in such agony and praying so very earnestly that "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). Modern medical scientists simply affirm by their research what the psalmists claimed thousands of years ago: those who afflict the soul of another also often afflict his or her body.

Retained Agency of the Hearer

While speech-act theory assumes speech-acts result in perlocutionary effects on the part of the hearer, one cannot assume the effects will align with the speaker's intent nor with logical expectation. Nicholas Wolterstorff acknowledges that while a speaker's utterance may count as his making a request, or what I might call a "let there be," hearers may refuse to acknowledge it as such.[37] In other words, Wolterstorff intentionally rejects the notion of a behavioristic connection between the speaker's active utterance and its success in moving the hearer toward an anticipatable response.[38] According to Wolterstorff, the speaker, by uttering, requests that the hearer do something, believe something, or respond in some way to his speech action. Yet the hearer may refuse to grant the speaker the standing to make the request.[39] That refusal is itself a response, but it is not the speaker's intended response. The hearer refuses to grant the

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[37] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 83–84.

[38] Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 83.

[39] Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 84.

speaker the standing and rights he requests by way of his utterance. The hearer retains agency to act, believe, or otherwise respond as he or she deems appropriate.

Wolterstorff's assertions regarding a hearer's retained agency echo Scripture's good news that provides hope for the oppressed. Those who suffer under oppression may cling to God's words and reject the words of the oppressor. For sufferers, destroying strongholds and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God may simply entail holding fast to what God says in his Word about their worth, standing, and purpose as God's image bearers and their position as redeemed saints (2 Cor 10:5). Persevering in faith under the weight of verbal oppression might entail refusing to be coerced into sinful actions or lose faith in Christ's accomplished and ongoing work on their behalf. In all cases, a faith-filled response should involve allowing Christ's lordship to reign supreme and his Word to instruct.

David demonstrates retained agency when he continues to trust God through harsh verbal mistreatment. For example, in Psalm 55, David casts "his burden on the Lord" who sustains the righteous and does not let them be moved (v. 22). Likewise, in Psalm 109, David writes, "In return for my love they accuse me, but I give myself to prayer" (v. 4). He entrusts himself to the one who "stands at the right hand of the needy one, to save him from those who condemn his soul to death" (v. 31). Though he is afflicted, soul and body, by his tormenters, David holds fast to God's promises, providing hope for all those who experience similar oppression.

While the recipient of verbal oppression retains agency, the prolonged suffering a spouse endures through abusive speech must be recognized and addressed. God designed the covenant of marriage to be an institution of safety, refuge, partnership, love, and flourishing. Instead, verbally abused spouses receive harsh mistreatment, such as control, insult, deception, dehumanization, and demand. Such egregious sin, which stands contrary to God's design for language, calls God's people to compassionate care. The oppressed spouse's agency and ability to respond biblically to verbal oppression will

be discussed in greater depth in the following chapter.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have argued (1) that a person's misuse of language to oppress his spouse constitutes sinful violations against God, the dignity and personhood of his spouse, God's moral law, and the marital covenant itself, and (2) that such speech-acts can detrimentally impact his spouse, both body and soul. First, I examined scriptural passages that describe or exemplify words in terms of violence. I used examples from both the Old and New Testaments that affirm the potential of words to cause great harm and focused especially on the psalms of David, which are replete with comparisons of violent speech to deadly weapons and vicious animals.

Second, I highlighted the theological, anthropological, moral, and covenantal implications of misusing language to oppress one's spouse. I noted that theologically, a verbal oppressor ignores the triune God as the origin and source of language and therefore fails to use his linguistic capacity rightly as a form of worship. I observed that the verbal oppressor violates his anthropological obligation to image God through language, imaging Satan instead through the functions of his language. I also emphasized the inherent anthropological violation against the personhood and dignity of his spouse who also bears God's image. In addressing moral implications of verbal oppression, I concurred with LeCroy et al., who argue that verbal oppression violates the sixth and ninth commandments based on applications of the WLC. Finally, I asserted that verbal oppression violates the marital covenant itself by dehumanizing the personhood of the spouse to such an extent as to cause estrangement as documented in Psalm 55:12–13 and 20–21 and 2 Samuel 6.

Third, I examined verbal oppression according to a complementarian perspective of marriage. I mentioned one-another commands given by Paul to all believers and again invoked the WLC to inform a fuller scriptural perspective on how

husbands and wives are to regard and treat one another as equal co-heirs with differing roles. I presented a scriptural perspective of a husband's misuse of position to verbally oppress his wife, using the example of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12, as well as Paul's and Peter's instructions given in Ephesians 5:25–33 and 1 Peter 3:7. I also discussed a wife's verbal abuse against her husband in terms of irreverent disregard for his God-ordained role, basing my assertions on Ephesians 5:22–24 and 33b, Titus 2:3–5, and 1 Peter 3:1–5.

Fourth, I adapted speech-act theory to present an anatomy of verbal oppression in marriage. I proposed five categories of illocutionary function and explained how these functions can impact the souls and bodies of oppressed spouses. In the next chapter, I will offer implications for counseling. In light of all that has been presented thus far, I will next propose practical ways in which chapters 2 through 6 can be applied to the counseling process, both to the oppressor and to the oppressed.

CHAPTER 7

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

In the previous chapters, I have sought to examine verbal spousal oppression through four lenses: theological, anthropological, moral, and covenantal. First, I argued that language is theological in nature because God is its origin and source. He has chosen language as the vessel by which humans can know him and one another. Second, I asserted that language is anthropological in nature because humans bear God's image and have been gifted the linguistic capacity to represent him to creation. Language is the primary means by which humans influence and are influenced by one another. Third, I contended that language is moral in nature, flowing from hearts oriented toward God and others or away from them. As moral agents, humans are responsible for using language in alignment with God's truths and according to his moral standards, all of which are revealed in Scripture. Fourth, I emphasized that language is covenantal in nature, as it is the means by which covenants are formed and sustained. Because marriage is designed to represent Christ and the church to creation, husbands and wives should uphold and sustain their covenant through language in ways that image the Christ-church covenant.

Based on the above premises, I argued in the previous chapter that spousal verbal oppression violates (1) the triune God's divine design for language as an agent of knowing, loving, and communing with God and one another; (2) the oppressor's obligation to image the God of love rightly, along with the personhood and dignity of the affected spouse as an image bearer; (3) God's moral standards for language as revealed in Scripture; and (4) the marital covenant and its representational mission. As argued in the previous chapter, verbal spousal oppression entails all four violations inextricably and simultaneously.

In this chapter, I will propose ways counselors and ministry leaders may practically apply the preceding chapters to counseling persons in marriages in which they suspect or confirm verbal oppression exists. First, I will suggest ways to discern when sinful speech rises to a level of oppressive speech, proposing seven factors counselors should consider in the assessment process. Second, I will offer suggestions for incorporating and adapting my theological-anthropological-moral-covenantal (TAMC) framework in counseling a verbally oppressive spouse, followed by recommended steps toward change. I will provide a growth exercise for helping the oppressor learn to categorize and assess the oppressive functions of his speech so that he can work toward change. Third, I will discuss ways a counselor might incorporate my TAMC framework in counseling spouses who suffer from verbal oppression. My aim is that counselors and ministry leaders would approach persons who exhibit patterns of verbal oppression in their marriages with a deepened sense of gravity, understanding the profound sinfulness and potential destructiveness of such sin. Additionally, my hope is to equip counselors and ministry leaders to counsel and encourage, using an adapted TAMC model, spouses who suffer verbal oppression.

Identifying Verbal Spousal Oppression

Even as counselors and ministry leaders observe indicators that verbal oppression may exist in a marriage, they often struggle to discern when less severe expressions of verbal sin cross the threshold of becoming verbal oppression. Understanding verbal sin and verbal oppression as lying on the same continuum can be helpful. All sinful speech fails to conform to God's standards and fails to function according to God's purposes for human communication. Certainly, every individual should be concerned about sinful speech, though, in a very real sense, all humans misuse language regularly (Jas 3:2). People fail to say what they should say in a situation or to compose ideas into words with the perfection exemplified by Christ. Alternatively, they

say things they should not have said—or what should have been said differently or in some other place or time. They speak from anger rather than love or according to selfish motives rather than God-honoring ones. Even with the best of motives and intentions, all people fail to meet God's standard for speech as presented in Scripture (Rom 3:23). As with any sin, Scripture calls those who sin verbally against others to confess and repent before God and the person against whom they sin (Matt 5:23–24; Jas 5:16). God takes no sin lightly, nor should we. Therefore, counselors and ministry leaders should address verbal sin, whether it fits in a category of oppression or not, because sin against a person has occurred.

While oppressive speech lies on the continuum of fallen, sinful speech, learning to identify destructive, oppressive speech in contrast to general expressions of sinful speech is crucial for effective counseling. I propose that counselors should consider seven key factors in identifying verbal oppression in marriage: (1) heart orientation, (2) position, (3) function, (4) intent, (5) severity, (6) frequency, and (7) experienced effects. Such assessment requires much observation, dialogue, and inquiry between the counselor and both spouses, together and individually. Because the ways and circumstances in which language can be misused in marriage detrimentally can vary from one marriage to the next, these factors should be evaluated individually. Not all factors may be relevant to every case. For example, a wife may verbally oppress her husband, though, according to a complementarian perspective, she does not hold the position of greater influence or authority over him. Analyzing the misuse of language through a variety of relevant lenses will assist the assessment process.

Heart Orientation

As has been emphasized in chapter 4 of this dissertation, all speech flows from a heart oriented either toward God and others or toward self (Luke 6:45). All sinful speech is fallen and reflects a heart that is—within a particular set of circumstances and

moment—oriented toward self. Therefore, distinguishing verbal oppression from instances of less severe forms of sinful speech requires observing how a spouse generally interacts with his spouse. Do occasional instances of verbal sin stand out as anomalous to his overall regard for and disposition toward his spouse, or are such instances typical and aligned with other outward self-serving manifestations of his heart? Does his use of language reflect a heart directed toward his spouse's well-being? Are his words toward and about his spouse generally gracious and positive? Do his words reflect an alignment with God's heart for her? Heart orientation lies at the very root of language; therefore, verbal spousal oppression reveals a heart oriented away from God and one's spouse.

Position

One important factor that should be considered in distinguishing verbal oppression from verbal sin is that of position. When one who has a position of authority or influence over another uses his position and capacities toward the detriment rather than the well-being of the other, oppression occurs. According to a complementarian perspective of marriage, the husband is delegated a position of authority, and he should use his authority and capacities to serve and care for his wife. Using one's position and authority to lord over those under his care aligns with a pagan model of headship that is forbidden among God's people (Matt 20:25–28). This is not to say that a woman cannot verbally abuse her husband but to emphasize that husbands who misuse their positions and linguistic capacities to their wives' detriment commit verbal oppression. In any situation where one holds a position of headship over another, that person must use his or her linguistic capacity toward the other's benefit.

Function

In the previous chapter, I proposed five functional categories of oppressive speech: (1) dominating, (2) diminishing, (3) deceiving, (4) destabilizing, and (5) dethroning. Examining sinful language through these lenses (which often overlap) can

help identify verbal oppression in a marriage. If a husband exclaims, "I wish you would leave me alone!" he certainly demonstrates a fallen use of language. There may be a diminishing or dominating aspect to the utterance, but apart from the presence of other factors, such speech would not constitute oppressive speech. In contrast, "I would not have married you if I'd known you'd get so fat" leaves no space for doubt. Such an utterance functions in such a way as to diminish the personhood of the spouse. Learning to examine language using the above lenses serves as a vital step in identifying oppressive speech.

Intent

Counselors and ministry leaders should help oppressors learn to examine and assess the intentions of their hearts in their communication. While intent often aligns with function, this is not always the case. The noetic effects of sin impact humanity in ways that often disconnect the two. Both are volitional in nature. However, *intent* describes the heart's desired action—what he seeks to accomplish through words—whereas *function* entails the actual ways in which his words act upon others. For example, one who continually shifts blame to his spouse for his shortcomings or behavior may endeavor to disassociate himself from perceptions of sinfulness or fault. His intent may be to maintain a positive perception of himself, while his language functions to deceive and diminish. He is first self-deceived, and out of that self-deception, he uses language that functions to deceive and diminish (Jer 17:9). Similarly, a husband who continually corrects his wife as though she were a child may not consciously intend to diminish her sense of agency or dignity but, in his own mind, intend to instruct her. In reality, he uses language to dominate her, and that domination has a diminishing effect. In his self-deception, he attributes good intentions to his sinful behavior (Prov 21:2). Helping an oppressor to identify and evaluate intentions as well as functions and examining both under the lens of Scripture is crucial for identifying areas of needed change.

Additionally, a person will often speak in accordance with multiple intentions of the heart. For example, Ananias and Sapphira attempted to deceive the apostles about how much money they gained from the sale of a piece of property (Acts 5:1–11). Peter pointed out to Ananias that the property and monies were at Ananias's disposal to do with as he pleased, so he asked Ananias why he had contrived in his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit (5:4). Ananias's act of uttering an unnecessary lie seems indicative of multiple possible intents—to deceive even God, to elevate the perceptions of others regarding his character, and to withhold part of his earnings for himself while appearing more sacrificial than was true of him. Underneath his deception, one can see the roots of pride and greed. Intent emerges from such roots, often in plurality.

Severity

In identifying verbal oppression in contrast to general forms of verbal sin, assessing levels of severity is at least as important as assessing levels of frequency. Oppressive speech carries a layer of force that exceeds less severe expressions of sinful speech. It comes at a price, and that price is borne not by the speaker but by the object of his speech. The greater the level of force, the greater the degree of suffering may be experienced by a spouse. Counselors can conceptualize levels of severity with any of the functions of oppressive speech by asking questions such as the following: How severely is he dominating her through words? How much of his wife's personal agency is he infringing upon through language? How severely is he using deception to manipulate his wife or cause her to question her perception? How diminishing to his wife's personhood were the words he spoke to her?

For example, a husband who utters something deeply hurtful to his wife on a single occasion may not fit a typical definition of a verbal oppressor, but he will have committed an egregious sin against her that merits attention. Perhaps he admits on only one occasion to his wife, "Marrying you was the biggest mistake I ever made." Even if he

utters such words only once, their effects can be devastating to his wife and his marital covenant. His words carry a diminishing impact, and that impact is severe. In contrast, a husband who occasionally speaks selfishly, such as saying, “I really don’t feel like hearing about your problem with your sister right now,” undoubtedly exhibits a degree of diminishment but on a lesser scale of severity. Over time, such dismissive and/or diminishing remarks add up and may merit attention. Therefore, while assessing severity requires subjective judgment, assessing frequency is also important in determining whether oppression exists.

Frequency

Assessing the frequency of verbal utterances can aid a counselor or ministry leader in identifying patterns of oppression. Severity and frequency should be considered in conjunction with one another. The greater the severity of the utterance, the lesser frequency is required to constitute oppression. Conversely, the greater the frequency of such utterances, the lesser severity is required to constitute oppression. When severity and frequency are both high, the level of oppression is greatest. To illustrate, using the example I presented of a husband who utters only once to his wife his regret for marrying her, one may find no correlation between the number of times he utters that statement and the number of times his wife suffers pain from it. Perhaps each time they celebrate their wedding anniversary or every time he expresses kind words, she hears the regret he spoke once. In other words, the hurt he inflicted in a matter of seconds may be experienced afresh by his wife quite often. In such a case, an egregious use of language can levy lasting effects, irrespective of any pattern.

As an additional example, a husband whose boss denies him a promotion annually at his performance review and who spends the next two weeks using dominating and diminishing speech toward his wife exhibits a pattern. He may display these episodes only annually, but the severity of his words toward his wife constitutes oppressive speech

that should be addressed. He might lack any awareness of the pattern, but such obliviousness prompts rather than negates a call for intervention.

On the other hand, marriages in which sinful uses of language are frequent yet less severe may constitute verbal oppression. A husband who interrupts his wife when she expresses her religious opinions exhibits speech patterns that, over time, may function to diminish and dominate her. One who often minimizes his role and shifts blame for conflicts likewise uses speech in ways that are deceptive and diminishing, if not dominating. Therefore, evaluating frequency is an important element of assessing verbal oppression, especially when severity is less pronounced.

Experienced Effects

Because no two individuals are exactly alike, persons exposed to similar forms and degrees of oppressive speech may respond differently.[1] One may feel deeply humiliated by an insult, while another remains confident in her identity in Christ. Nonetheless, those who are exposed to pervasive patterns of verbal oppression, as with any other form of oppression, will often experience consequences, body and soul, from long-term exposure. Recognizing possible responses by the soul such as fearfulness, anxiety, depression, inhibition, withdrawal, or intimidation in a spouse is helpful in assessing oppression. Additionally, identifying any physical manifestations of distress or changes in health (which may involve any organ or system in the body) can help a counselor or ministry leader distinguish verbal oppression from lesser degrees of experienced verbal sin. A sufferer may have visited doctors more often or contracted more illnesses than before sinful speech patterns developed in the marriage. Identifying such changes may help determine whether verbal oppression exists, but other of the

[1] Experienced effects alone do not determine whether a person is experiencing oppressive speech. It is important that counselors and ministry leaders use wisdom and discernment in determining whether one's perceptions align with reality. Using the lens of Scripture and the other factors listed here for assessment can help form an accurate understanding.

preceding factors must be evaluated to form that determination. Harmful language that leads to spousal suffering also and inextricably renders a harmful violation to the marital covenant. This aspect of violation of the covenantal bond helps distinguish verbal oppression from lesser forms of verbal sin. The most trusted way to unveil these factors is by gathering data from the suspected sufferer of oppression. Gathering data by using the informal survey provided in appendix 1 can help provide insight into the experiences of the spouse who may be suffering under verbal spousal oppression (see appendix 1).

Table 2 also provides a useful tool for assessing the presence and severity of verbal oppression according to the suggested observed or reported seven factors.

Table 2. Seven-factor evaluation for assessing verbal oppression in marriage

Factor of Consideration		**"X"**		**"X"**
Heart Orientation	Toward Self		Toward God and Spouse	
Position	Authority/Greater Influence		Submission/Lesser Influence	
Function	Oppressive Functions: Dominating Diminishing Deceiving Destabilizing Dethroning	(Place an "X" for each function present)	Non-Oppressive Functions (If oppressive functions are absent, verbal oppression is ruled out.)	

Factor of Consideration		"X"		"X"
Intent	Intent to use speech toward the detriment of the spouse		Absence of intent to use speech toward the detriment of the spouse	
Severity	Greater severity		Lesser Severity	
Frequency	Often/Usually		Sometimes/Rarely	
Experienced Effects	Observable or reported physical or emotional detrimental effects on the spouse		No observable or reported physical or emotional detrimental effects on the spouse	

Using table 2, the greater the number of boxes marked with an "X" in the center column indicates a greater cause for concern regarding the presence or prevalence of verbal spousal oppression. If even one box in the center column is marked with an "X," attention and counseling intervention are warranted. If verbal oppression is confirmed, the oppressive spouse and the oppressed spouse should be counseled separately.

Counseling the Verbally Oppressive Spouse

When a counselor identifies verbal oppression in a marriage, he should cease conjoint counseling and shift toward concurrent counseling. This shift occurs in recognition of the oppressor's heart as the center of the problem and, therefore, the central focus to be addressed in counseling. Adapting the TAMC framework in counseling the oppressor can help illuminate his sin and need for repentance.

Illuminating Sinful Violations Using the TAMC Framework

Individuals who verbally oppress their spouses remain darkened in their

understanding of the wickedness inherent to their behavior (Eph 4:18). Therefore, the first goal of the counselor is to help the counselee recognize his sin according to the fourfold (TAMC) model presented in chapter 6. Counselors and ministry leaders want oppressors to recognize their failure to consider God as the source of language who has created language as a means for knowing and communing with him, their spouse, and others. They want oppressors to experience conviction over how they have maligned God's image both by representing him poorly and by disrespecting and harming their spouses who also bear the divine image. They want to help oppressors recognize their violations of God's moral standards for language described in Scripture. Further, they want to help them acknowledge their misuse of language as a violation of the marital covenant. They should come alongside and exhort verbal oppressors to put off the sinful use of language (Col 3:8–10) and put on God-glorifying speech (Col 3:12–17; 4:6). This requires heart reorientation, which is a work of the Holy Spirit through the renewal of the mind (Ezek 36:26–27; Rom 12:2). Table 3 provides a framework through which counselors and ministry leaders can help those who verbally oppress their spouses recognize their sin and need for repentance.

Table 3. TAMC framework for counseling verbally oppressive spouses

Theological	**Anthropological**
My misuse of language demonstrates my failure to recognize God as the origin and source of language who has ordained it as a gift to be stewarded as an instrument of knowing, loving, and communing with him, my spouse, and others. I need to confess and repent to God for how I have failed to honor and steward this profound gift. (Gen 1–2; Col 3:17)	Because I bear God's image, I am gifted with a godlike linguistic capacity that carries influential power. By verbally oppressing my spouse, I commit egregious sin in failing to image God's love rightly, in treating God's image in my spouse as corrupt, and in using language in opposition to the image-bearing functions to love and build up. I have used the power of language to potentially harm my spouse in both soul and body. I must acknowledge, confess, and repent for the ways in which I have sinned against God and my spouse. (Gen 1:26–27; Prov 12:18; 18:21; 1 Pet 4:10)
Moral	**Covenantal**
As a moral agent, I bear responsibility before God to use language in alignment with God's truth and moral standards as revealed in Scripture, for his glory and according to his purposes. By verbally oppressing my spouse, I violate God's moral standards revealed in Scripture. Because my heart is oriented toward myself and away from God and my spouse, I use language for my own purposes. I need to confess and repent for my failure to love God with all my heart soul mind and strength and my spouse as myself. (Matt 12:36; Mark 12:30–31; Col 3:5–17)	God created language as the primary vehicle by which to draw humanity into covenant with himself and one another. Since its loving use is integral to forming and sustaining the marital covenant, I violate the marital covenant itself when I verbally oppress my spouse. Instead of displaying Christ's covenantal love for the church to creation, I display a distorted and satanic model. I need to confess and repent for how I have violated my marital covenant and misrepresented Christ and the church to creation. (Eph 5:22–33)

Helping oppressors recognize the gravity of their unrepentant sin through this framework provides a foundation for implementing steps toward change.

Identifying Patterns of Verbal Oppression

As counselors or ministry leaders recognize verbal oppression, they should

seek to identify information about the contexts, precipitating events (not to be confused with *causative* events), or any other correlating factors associated with verbally oppressive episodes. Identifying such factors can help oppressors develop greater awareness and vigilance. For example, a correlation may exist between one's alcohol consumption and verbal tirades against his spouse. Recognizing this association can motivate the oppressive spouse to decrease or eliminate alcohol consumption. Or, perhaps, one may punish his spouse with silence after she expresses an opinion contrary to his own in front of others or even in response to verbal sin on her part. Helping him associate his mistreatment with sinful pride can, again, help him become more vigilant to the sin at work in him. Counselors should try to determine whether predictable patterns exist or whether abuse occurs randomly. In many marriages, oppression may be pervasive and independent of precipitating or contextual events. Nonetheless, identifying correlating and precipitating factors can help verbal oppressors be on guard and learn to respond biblically to circumstances in which temptation is known to escalate.

Identifying Functions of Verbal Oppression

Not all oppressors exhibit every type of verbal oppression. Counselors and ministry leaders should endeavor to help an oppressor recognize how his uses of language function toward his spouse. As highlighted in the previous chapter, functions overlap. One who uses language to dominate his spouse simultaneously diminishes her personal agency. However, one might use diminishing speech without attempting to dominate his spouse. Most oppressive spouses lack categories for understanding the detrimental functions of their speech. A repeated use of the informal growth exercise provided in appendix 2 can help verbal oppressors learn to recognize their speech as functional acts and to assess, categorize, and ultimately change their speech accordingly.

Identifying Roots of Verbal Oppression

When questioned about the causes of their verbal oppression, many point to the words or actions of their spouses. The counselor exercises an important role in helping verbal oppressors identify the cause of their sin as existing within their hearts. Having already identified occasions or patterns and types of verbal oppression exhibited in a marriage, counselors can ask questions to help identify various underlying roots. For example, if a person uses words to diminish his spouse when she disagrees with him in public, several possible roots may be revealed.

Pride

At the root of every sin lies some level of pride. The human desire to be like God appears with the very first act of human rebellion in Genesis 3. Through verbal spousal oppression, individuals designate themselves as gods over their spouses. They circumvent God's authority, setting themselves above their spouses as judges and lords. Scripture warns that sinful pride does not go unpunished (Prov 16:5).

Passions

According to James, people quarrel and fight due to the passions at war within them (4:1). These include a desire for what they do not have and covetousness for what they cannot obtain (4:2). James's references to war and murder allude to anger and combativeness, which flow from unmet desire. James also points to jealousy and selfish ambition as roots to verbal sin, which lead to disorder and every evil practice (3:16). He reminds us that these are earthly and satanic in nature and devoid of wisdom (3:15). The apostle Paul also attributes sinful speech to roots that are earthly in nature, including passions, evil desire, covetousness, and idolatry (Col 3:5–6). He instructs believers to put these off, as well as the anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk that emerge from them (Col 3:7–10). Sinful speech flows from hearts saturated with sinful passions and oriented away from God and others and toward self. Likewise, John warns that for

whoever loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him, and that the world and its desires will pass away while those who do God's will shall abide forever (1 John 2:15–17).

Foolishness

Wherever pride exists, foolishness abides also. The fool says in his heart, "There is no God" (Ps 14:1a). As the psalmist suggests, such fools "are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good" (Ps 14:1b). Paul writes of such fools in his letter to the Romans:

> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Rom 1:21–23)

Spousal oppressors demonstrate such exchange, though the images with which they replace God are of themselves. Though created by God in his image, they exalt themselves above him and demand that their spouses do the same by believing their lies, acquiescing to their demands, and conforming to their standards.

Imparting Gospel Hope: Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation (CFRC)

After counselors and ministry leaders have helped oppressors understand their misuse of language through a TAMC framework, they should provide gospel hope for change. A CFRC redemptive model stands upon four premises. [2]First, Scripture tells us humanity was created in God's image and originally functioned perfectly according to God's design. Second, in Genesis 3, we learn that Adam and Eve chose to disobey God, bringing sin and death into the world. From that point forward, humans no longer

[2] For an in-depth look at how to apply a CFRC model to counseling, see Robert W. Kellemen, *Gospel-Centered Counseling: How Christ Changes Lives*, Equipping Biblical Counselors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

functioned in perfect accordance with God's design. Third, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world, who paid the penalty for humanity's rebellion and broke the chains of sin and death by his death and resurrection. Through union with Christ, God's people are empowered to live obediently and function according to their original design, even as their battle against sin continues. Fourth, when Christ returns, those who are reconciled to God through faith in him will live in eternal fellowship with God, no longer affected by the consequences of sin. A potential application of this four-pronged model to a verbally oppressive spouse might appear as follows:

Creation

God created mankind in his image, according to his likeness. Just as God's use of language is holy and good, humanity was designed to use language in ways that image his nature and please him. Evidence of this good design appears in Genesis 2, when God made Eve from Adam's rib, and Adam rejoiced, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen 2:23). Adam recognizes Eve as a gift from his Creator and uses language to express gratitude for her, glorifying the God who made her from Adam's very own body. His words flow from a heart oriented toward God and toward his new bride. By his use of the phrase "at last," he reveals that even as he enjoyed fellowship with God, she satisfied a longing in his soul. His words echo God's words found in Genesis 2:18: "It is not good that the man should be alone." Adam expresses no desire to dominate his wife. His words affirm rather than diminish her. There is no deception, no blame, no suspicion, nor any threat against her. He does not attempt to dethrone God's authority over her but rather acknowledges the Lord as God over her by his use of the phrase "was taken out of man," understanding he was asleep when God made her.

Fall

Adam and Eve chose sin in the garden. Their act of rebellion immediately

oriented their hearts away from God and toward self, and their language reflected that reorientation. Adam's disposition toward Eve changed dramatically. Far different from the joy he formerly expressed in Genesis 2:23, Adam no longer delighted in his wife as a gift from God but instead spoke of her as a liability who bore the blame for his failure. He no longer acknowledged her as taken from his very own body but treated her as a foreign entity for whom he blamed God: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Gen 3:12). This shift from "she was taken out of Man" to "whom you gave to be with me," represents new division. Adam verbally separated himself from Eve, arguing that the blame for sin rested on her alone. He did not mention that it was he who received from God the command not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and he who failed to ensure the command was followed. Adam's heart and words toward Eve changed under the noetic effects of sin. The birth of verbal oppression is found in Genesis 3:12, when Adam first speaks diminishingly and deceptively about his wife, Eve.

From Genesis 3 forward, humans continue to use language in ways that dominate, diminish, deceive, and destabilize their spouses and dethrone God's position and authority. By doing so, they sin against God, imaging Satan rather than their Creator. They sin against God and their spouses by affronting the image in their spouses. They fail to meet God's standards for language and to use it for his glory and the good of their spouses. Their misuse of language violates the marital covenant that it is meant to form and sustain. Counselors and ministry leaders should endeavor to help a verbal oppressor accurately recognize his words as sinful acts that are offensive to God and destructive toward his spouse.

Redemption

The wonderful news for those who misuse language to oppress their spouses is that Jesus, by his death and resurrection, defeated the power of sin and death over his

people.[3] He ascended to heaven, sent his Spirit, and continues to intercede for those who have been reconciled to God by grace through faith in him. As Christians, we believe that oppressors can change—indeed, we believe we who are in Christ *must* change. One who claims to be in Christ but whose heart seems oriented away from his spouse needs to hear the gospel afresh and consider whether he is truly regenerate. Scripture denies the compatibility between a professed love for the unseen God and hatred for one's seen brother (1 John 4:20). If one is not in Christ, he should confess and repent of his sin and be saved. If he professes to be in Christ, he should confess and repent of his sin so that the power of the gospel will be made manifest in his life. When a person's use of language reveals a heart oriented toward self rather than toward God and his spouse, he needs to put off sinful speech and put on righteous speech through the application of the Word, having his heart reoriented toward God and his spouse by the power of the Spirit. Confession, repentance, and change should entail the following:

1. *Confession before God, the spouse, and all who have been impacted by the sin*.[4] This may also include children. Not only should he confess his outward, expressed sin but also the underlying sin in his heart which provoked his outward expression of sin. He should take full responsibility for his sin, not blaming his spouse, circumstances, nor any external factor for his sin.

2. *Repentance of sin*. A verbally oppressive spouse must turn away from the sin that has ensnared him. First, he must put off the sin of verbal oppression and the covetousness, pride, and foolishness at work in him (Col 3:5). Additionally, he must put on gentleness and humility, instructed by God's Word, being conformed to the image of Christ and bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Col 3:12; Rom 8:29; Gal 5:22–23).

3. *Accountability.* A verbally oppressive spouse should be pointed toward accountability with one or more spiritually mature members of the same gender in his local church.

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[3] The remaining general guidelines for counseling the oppressive and the oppressed spouse flow largely from my studies under Robert Jones. For more detailed guidelines, see Robert D. Jones, *35100 Marriage and Family Course Teaching and Discussion Manual*, rev. ed. (Louisville: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022); Robert D. Jones, *Pursuing Peace: A Christian Guide to Handling Our Conflicts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), ProQuest; Robert D. Jones, "Thinking Biblically about Responding to Abuse: A Conceptual Model" (unpublished manuscript, 2022).

[4] Jones, *35100 Marriage and Family Course*, p. 87.

4. *Submission to church authorities*. Any spouse who uses his or her capacities toward the detriment of his or her spouse should submit to the shepherds of their local church for accountability and care, which should also include care for the oppressed spouse.

5. *Acceptance of consequences*. A verbally oppressive spouse should accept the consequences of his or her sin. His sin may levy such harmful and ongoing effects as to lead to church discipline, marital separation, or even divorce. Potential consequences such as these should motivate him to pursue help for change.

Consummation

Those who have committed verbal spousal oppression need to be warned that one day, every person will give an account for every idle (not fruit-bearing) word they have spoken (Matt 12:36). However, those who are in Christ and who have walked in repentance and righteousness need not fear God's wrath, since Christ has conquered sin and death. The day will come when they will be glorified (1 John 3:2). For the first time, they will love God and others perfectly, and their use of language will reflect that perfect love. Though now their battle against sin remains (Rom 7:21–25; 1 Pet 2:11), its days are numbered. Having this assurance and the power of Christ available to them now, those who verbally oppress can experience gospel hope in their ability to walk in obedience, experiencing a taste of the "not yet" while living in the "already." Knowledge that the Day of the Lord is quickly approaching should motivate sinners toward repentance.

Church Intervention When the Oppressor Lacks Repentance

Those who counsel verbally oppressive spouses should recognize the potentially grave ramifications of the oppressor's sin as erosive to the marital covenant. Coordinating care with church elders and helping them understand the destructive nature of verbal oppression are crucial steps for confronting and admonishing the oppressor and exhorting him toward repentance and accountability. Elders should address verbal spousal oppression with similar urgency as they would other forms of abuse, not only to demonstrate love and care for the sufferer but also to demonstrate genuine love for the

oppressor's soul. The desire to protect and preserve the marital covenant should be channeled into pressing the oppressor toward change, not minimizing or dismissing the suffering of his spouse.

Additionally, elders should ensure the oppressed spouse receives intentional care. They might encourage the sufferer to bring a same-gendered godly friend to counseling sessions or meetings. In many cases, inviting a godly couple to participate in any individual or conjoint counseling sessions and be available to both spouses outside of counseling may be helpful. Additionally, they should enlist the sufferer's input on the spouse's progress or lack thereof, recognizing a tendency among oppressors to hide their sin. In some cases, connecting her with community resources and support, including consultations with legal professionals, may also be warranted as a vital aspect of her care.

Counseling the Verbally Oppressed Spouse

Counselors and ministry leaders who identify verbal oppression in a marriage should also understand that the oppressed spouse will often exhibit distorted understanding in all four categories of the TAMC framework. Because verbally oppressed spouses often adopt the distorted views of their oppressors, replacing distorted beliefs with biblical truth becomes the paramount undertaking for those who counsel them. Theologically, she may not recognize how God has revealed himself through language nor trust what he has spoken to her through his Word. She may distrust God's heart toward her. She may be tempted to concede to her spouse's condemnation and criticism of her rather than Scripture's valuation of her as an image bearer. She might believe her mistreatment is the merited result of her failure to meet God's standards, or she may feel helpless in being able to meet those standards. Furthermore, she may not perceive how greatly her marriage deviates from God's design for the marital covenant. Hope and strength reemerge not just by replacing life-depleting words with life-giving encouragement but also by helping oppressed spouses replace wrong perceptions and

beliefs with scriptural truths as seen through all four lenses in the TAMC framework I have presented. Using the adapted TAMC framework presented in table 4 can serve as a beneficial entry point in encouraging those who experience verbal spousal oppression.

Table 4. TAMC framework for counseling sufferers of verbal spousal oppression

Theological	**Anthropological**
The God who made the world and all that is in it, including me, provided language so I can know, love, and commune with him and others. His words offer love, comfort, safety, and strength. I can trust his words because he is good and his heart is oriented toward me. (Gen 1:1, 26–27; 2:7–24; Pss 113; 121:5–8; 145; 147:3–6)	I am made in God's image and possess inherent, immeasurable worth. I have been bought with a price—the highest price—Jesus's blood shed for me. What God has spoken over me and to me cannot be nullified by the words or actions of my spouse. God designed me to serve him and to reflect his image to creation. He empowers me to do these even as I suffer verbal oppression in my marriage. (Gen 1:26–27; Psalm 8:5; 1 Cor 6:19–10; 1 Pet 1:17–19; 3:15–16)
Moral	**Covenantal**
Jesus lived a perfect moral life. Because he loves me, he does not dominate, diminish, deceive, or destabilize. Neither does he dethrone, because all authority on heaven and earth has been given to him. Because his Spirit lives in me, I can respond righteously to mistreatment. This does not mean I should deny or minimize abuse or refrain from seeking help but that I can obey God's Word and please him through faith-filled responses to my suffering. (Matt 10:28; 28:18; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:13–16; 3:7)	Jesus is my covenant-keeper. He demonstrated loving covenant faithfulness by suffering God's wrath for my sin so I could live eternally with him. He will never leave me nor forsake me, and nothing can separate me from his love. Even now, he is interceding for me. My hope is secured in him. He will sustain me and never let me go. (Deut 31:8; Ps 55:22; Rom 8:35–39; 2 Cor 5:15; Heb 7:25, 13:5)

To expound on this framework, counselors and ministry leaders should first endeavor to realign sufferers' theological misconceptions.[5] Just as the serpent did with Eve in Genesis 3, the verbal oppressor's misuse of language can cast doubt upon God's words and character in the eyes of his spouse. Scriptural passages such as Psalm 113 and 145 can correct her distorted view of God and his words, assuring her of his greatness and perfection, his goodness toward her, and the trustworthiness of his words.

Second, verbal oppressors often lead their spouses to doubt their identity and worth as image bearers and redeemed children of God.[6] Having experienced dominating, diminishing, deceiving, and/or destabilizing treatment from their spouses, verbally oppressed sufferers may perceive themselves as lacking the capacity to worship and serve God and reflect him to creation. They may doubt even their perception and intellect. Scripture provides hope for such sufferers by assuring them of their ability to serve God and model Christlikeness to creation even as they suffer maltreatment and harm, such as we see in the examples of Hagar (Gen 16), Joseph (Gen 37–50), and Job (1–2).[7]

Third, those who suffer under verbal spousal oppression retain moral agency and can respond righteously to verbal sin and oppression. Proverbs 26:4 exhorts God's people to not answer a fool according to his folly "lest you be like him yourself." Sufferers who respond sinfully to sinful treatment fall into such a trap. However, Scripture teaches that the oppressed can "put to silence the ignorance of foolish people"

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[5] In this section, I wlll not present exhaustive guidelines for counseling victims of verbal oppression but guidelines for applying the TAMC framework in counseling sufferers of verbal oppression. Other scholars have presented helpful instructions for counseling sufferers of oppression. See Darby A. Strickland, *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2019); Brad Hambrick, ed., *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused* (Nashville: B&H, 2019); Jeremy Pierre and Greg Wilson, *When Home Hurts : A Guide for Responding Wisely to Domestic Abuse in Your Church* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2021); Jones, *Pursuing Peace: A Christian Guide to Handling Our Conflicts*; Robert D. Jones, Kristin L. Kellen, and Rob Green, *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2021).

[6] Jones, "Thinking Biblically," 7.

[7] Jones, "Thinking Biblically," 4–6.

by doing the will of God (1 Pet 2:15). This is not to say that the suffering spouse must endure abuse and oppression. To the contrary, the sufferer's retained agency means she can use her freedom not to cover up evil but to be a servant of God (1 Pet 2:16). By her righteous response, she can counter the words of her oppressor, following the example set by Christ (1 Pet 2:21). She can entrust herself to the one who judges justly (1 Pet 2:23). This is not to suggest she cannot or should not take steps to confront and bring an end to her husband's sin but that she possesses moral agency to respond righteously (Lev 19:17–18; Prov 9:8; 19:25; 27:5–6; Matt 18:15; Rev 3:19).[8] Robert Jones offers three godly responses to oppressive treatment: (1) dealing directly with the oppression; (2) loving the abuser; and (3) walking with the Lord daily, not being dominated and controlled by the abuse.[9] In other words, a righteous response to verbal spousal oppression includes exhorting her husband to repent of his sin and imparting to him the gospel hope, not being ruled by the oppression but rather lovingly confronting it with truth (Luke 17:3–4; Gal 6:1).

Fourth, those who suffer under verbal spousal oppression often experience despair, placing their hope in the improvement of their marriage. Helping sufferers find security and comfort in their covenant with God will help equip them to answer their oppressor. The author of Psalm 119:41–42 exemplifies this response-ability: "Let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise; then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me, for I trust in your word." The psalmist commits to answer his tormentor not according to the taunt but according to God's *hesed* love for him and the surety of God's salvific covenant promise. His security is firmly grounded by his covenant with God, whose words give him hope and life even as his soul clings to dust and melts away for sorrow (vv. 25, 28, 40, 43, 49, 93, 161). In the same way, the

[8] For more on the appropriateness of loving confrontation, see Jones, *Pursuing Peace*, chap. 10, "Redeeming the Art of Rebuke and Granting Forgiveness."

[9] Jones, "Thinking Biblically," 8–9.

person who finds comfort in God's Word and in God's steadfast love and covenant faithfulness can answer her oppressor not according to his folly but according to God's truth. She tethers her confidence not in her husband's covenant faithfulness or approval but in God's.

Further, the oppressed spouse honors and does not dishonor the marital covenant by turning to her church authorities or civil authorities for help (Rom 13:1–5). Such covenant faithfulness demonstrates a love for the offending spouse's soul that transcends his action toward her. Rather than becoming a partner to her spouse's sin by keeping it hidden, she exhorts him toward repentance by uncovering it (Eph 5:11). God calls the church to discipline unfaithful Christians so as to exhort them toward repentance. He also calls civil authorities to uphold the righteous and punish the wicked. Therefore, a sufferer who brings her unrepentant oppressive spouse to the attention of such spiritual and civil authorities upholds rather than violates the marital covenant.[10] By doing so, she calls her spouse to submit to God's ordained authorities. She does so with the hope that her spouse will repent and that the marital covenant will be transformed into a reflection of Christ and the church. Further, she should be prepared to forgive and be relationally restored to a genuinely repentant spouse who demonstrates heart transformation in his treatment toward her.[11]

Forgiveness and the Unrepentant Spouse

One who suffers ongoing and unrepentant verbal spousal oppression lives under no obligation to transact horizontal forgiveness toward the oppressor, and it may even be unwise or unloving to do so. Especially in cases in which husbands disobey

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[10] Jones, "Thinking Biblically," 8.

[11] While the sin involved is different than adultery, application of Robert Jones's steps for cultivating forgiveness in marital unfaithfulness apply appropriately to verbal spousal oppression. See Robert D. Jones, *My Spouse Was Unfaithful: Finding Strength in God's Presence*, Ask the Christian Counselor (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2023), 60–70.

Scripture's command to live with their wives in an understanding way, the disruption of peace in the marriage—along with the effects on his wife and the covenant—may serve as a barrier to unity or reconciliation (1 Pet 3:7). In all cases, the sufferer should exercise attitudinal forgiveness, releasing the oppressor's sin to the Lord.[12] The sufferer adopts an attitude of commitment toward God to entrust the oppressor to God and God's judgment; to confess and repent of bitterness.[13] This is not to say that he or she should deny or dismiss the oppressor's sin nor continue to live and suffer under oppression. It is a means, rather, of trusting oneself to the One who judges justly. The heart orientation remains toward God and the offending spouse, earnestly desiring that the Lord would bring the oppressive spouse to repentance and relational reconciliation.[14]

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I synthesized the preceding chapters and presented methods for applying the arguments presented in chapters 2–6 to counseling couples affected by verbal oppression. First, I discussed how to distinguish between verbal oppression and lesser forms of verbal sin. I suggested seven factors counselors and ministry leaders should consider in identifying and assessing verbal oppression and described each of those factors. I offered an informal survey tool (appendix 1) counselors can use to gather data from spouses they suspect suffer verbal spousal oppression. I also provided a table that can used in assessing verbal oppression according to the seven factors. Second, I presented an adapted TAMC framework for counseling persons who verbally oppress their spouses. I outlined practical steps for change, including identifying patterns of verbal oppression, types of verbal oppression, and roots of verbal oppression. Building on that foundation, I turned toward applying the gospel in counseling using a CFRC

[12] Jones, *My Spouse Was Unfaithful*, 47–52.

[13] Jones, *Pursuing Peace*, 135.

[14] Jones, *Pursuing Peace*, 135.

paradigm. I subsequently offered practical steps toward change, including the use of a growth exercise presented in appendix 2. I also called for church intervention in cases in which the oppressor refuses to repent or fails to demonstrate genuine repentance. Third, I presented a TAMC framework for counseling persons who suffer verbal spousal oppression. I acknowledged distorted beliefs sufferers often develop regarding God, his character, the trustworthiness of his Word, their own value, their capabilities and perceptions, and their retention of moral agency. I then demonstrated how a TAMC approach can be used to correct distorted beliefs and to help sufferers reclaim agency, respond biblically to oppression, and place their hope in Christ's covenant faithfulness. I also affirmed the involvement of church and/or civil authorities as a means of upholding the marital covenant. Finally, I discussed the matter of forgiveness in cases in which the oppressor fails to demonstrate genuine repentance. In the following chapter, I will conclude my dissertation by summarizing the arguments I have presented in this and the preceding chapters.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I examined language through four lenses: theological, anthropological, moral, and covenantal. Through those lenses, I argued that because language originates in the triune God, married image bearers are commanded to use language in ways that reflect God's character, function according to his purposes, and conform to his moral standards to the benefit of their spouses and their marital covenant. Because the chief design purpose of language is love that builds up, verbal spousal oppression constitutes violations against God, the spouse, and the marital covenant itself. Such speech carries the power to detrimentally impact the spouse in both soul and body. I then offered implications for counseling, suggesting how a theological-anthropological-moral-covenantal (TAMC) framework might be practically applied in counseling spouses who verbally oppress or are verbally oppressed by their spouses.

In chapter 1, I introduced the topic of verbal oppression and explained why this writing project is needed. I articulated my thesis, reiterated in the preceding paragraph. I also outlined my methodology and presented a survey of literature pertinent to the topic of verbal oppression in marriage.

In chapter 2, I argued that language is theological in nature because the triune God is the origin and source of language. First, I presented historical support, beginning with Old Testament passages that exhibit God as a speaking God. I also offered New Testament passages that affirm the Trinity speaks. Additionally, I discussed four church fathers—Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo—and described how, together and in succession, they built the theological framework that undergirds our understanding of the Trinity as the origin and source of

language. I also mentioned contemporary voices, such as those of Vern Poythress, John Frame, Pierce Taylor Hibbs, and Kevin Vanhoozer, and classical theists, such as Kyle Claunch, and detailed their assertions affirming the Trinity as the origin and source of language. Second, I distinguished between the immanent and economic Trinity, noting that the phrase "immanent Trinity" describes who God is eternally irrelative to creation (*ad intra*) while the phrase "economic Trinity" is used to describe God in relation to the created order (*ad extra*). I explained that God is an ever-communicating God who has eternally self-communicated his divine essence—the Father speaking the Son, who is the Word, and both communicating the Spirit, who is the breath. In the economy, God has spoken in human language, a created medium by which he accommodates himself to humanity and through which they are able to know and relate to him and one another. I noted examples of intra-Trinitarian external divine communication via human language, such as when Jesus prayed the high priestly prayer in John 17. Additionally, God has spoken to humans through human language, beginning with Adam. He has spoken directly to specific persons as recorded in Scripture. He has spoken through the Law and the Prophets and in the person of Jesus. The Bible is his self-revelation through which he speaks to humanity today. I noted that the purpose of divine communication ad extra lay in God making himself and his will known to humanity. I also affirmed Pierce Taylor Hibbs's observation that language is communion behavior designed to draw humans into fellowship with God and one another. After discussing the purpose of divine communication ad extra, I discussed some of its primary functions. I argued that God has used language to create, sustain, reveal, bless or promise, and curse or warn. Ultimately, language is the means by which God has formed covenants with his chosen people, which I discussed in chapter 5.

In chapter 3, I argued that language is anthropological in nature and that humans, as image bearers, have been gifted a linguistic capacity that carries power by which they influence and are influenced by one another. I discussed the five prevalent

perspectives of the term *image bearer* (functional, relational, substantive, teleological, and ontological), embracing the ontological view but acknowledging the importance of the other four as contingent qualities of *imago Dei*. I also discussed the bipartite and gendered design of humanity along with contingent capacities before moving my focus to language as image-bearing behavior. I then mentioned the purposes of human language, upholding the view that God has gifted language to humanity so that we can know and commune with him, know and commune with one another, exercise representational rule over creation, and ultimately proclaim the gospel. I discussed the centrality of language to all five predominant views of what it means to bear God's image. Finally, I looked at language through the lens of speech-act theory, concurring with its assertion that to speak is to act upon another with intent in such a way as to cause an effect, which may or may not align with the speaker's desire. I presented and described the three elements of the speech act—locution, illocution, and perlocution—and concluded that just as Jesus Christ used language to influence others for God's glory and purposes, in alignment with his truth and for their good, humans are to do likewise, providing a segue into chapter 4.

In chapter 4, I argued that language is moral in nature and that humans, as moral agents, are responsible before God for how they use it—whether for his glory and according to his purposes or according to their own motives and will. Based in part on the work of Herman Dooyeweerd, I began by discussing the orientations of the heart, noting that since the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, humans have been born with hearts oriented away from God and toward perceived autonomy and self-fulfillment. I contrasted that with the heart of the regenerate, which is oriented toward God and obedience—even as the struggle against sin remains. I then examined the moral norms that are grounded in God's perfect moral character and made manifest in (1) the moral law imprinted on the human heart, (2) God's incarnate Son, and (3) God's inerrant Word. From that foundation, I argued that language and morality are inextricably linked. Righteous language springs from hearts oriented toward God. Such language images

God's character to creation, adheres to his purposes for human language, and functions according to his design for human language, all of which center on righteous love. Morally corrupt language fails to image God's character, adhere to his purposes for human language, or function according to his design for human language. Such language ultimately fails to demonstrate love for God and for the hearer.

In chapter 5, I argued that language is covenantal in nature and that its proper use is integral to forming, nurturing, and sustaining the marital covenant. First, I discussed the covenant of redemption as the basis of all covenants before exploring the meaning of covenant and the major covenants presented in Scripture. I highlighted *hesed* as a central driving force of covenant that God's people are to reciprocate (1) to God in forms of worship, obedience, and loyalty; (2) to others with whom they are in covenantal relations in forms of self-sacrificing love, service, and loyalty; and (3) to humanity in general in terms of love, service, and witness. Second, I examined the inextricable link between language and covenant, emphasizing that covenant is dependent upon human language for its formation and sustenance. Third, I discussed marriage as the primary covenant between humans, defining it according to a biblical perspective. I emphasized the obligation both husbands and wives have to speak life-giving words to one another in obedience to the one-another commands and in fulfillment of their specific gender-related roles in marriage according to Scripture.

In chapter 6, I argued that the misuse of language toward the detriment of persons constitutes violations against God, one's spouse, God's moral law, and the marital covenant itself. I presented a theological-anthropological-moral-covenantal (TAMC) framework for conceptualizing verbal oppression in marriage and discussed the implications of all four elements of the model. I then submitted a perspective of verbal oppression according to a complementarian understanding of marriage, detailing how the misuse of language toward the detriment of one's spouse violates Scripture, whether it is carried out by the husband or by the wife. I provided scriptural support for these

assertions. Next, I offered an "anatomy of verbal oppression" using an adapted model of speech-act theory: utterance, function, and effects. I proposed five illocutionary functions of verbal oppression: (1) dominating, (2) diminishing, (3) deceiving, (4) destabilizing, and (5) dethroning. I noted that these often overlap and discussed the possible effects associated with each. I also discussed the potential impact on the body and soul of the hearer.

In chapter 7, I discussed implications for counseling and offered a TAMC framework for incorporating the arguments presented in previous chapters to counseling spouses who inflict or experience verbal oppression. Second, I addressed the challenge of distinguishing between verbal oppression and less severe forms of verbal sin. I presented seven factors that should be considered in such an assessment. Third, I demonstrated how to incorporate a TAMC framework into counseling persons who exhibit verbal spousal oppression. I suggested applying the gospel through a Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation paradigm and offered practical steps toward change. Fourth, I adapted the TAMC framework to incorporate into counseling persons who suffer verbal spousal oppression. I demonstrated how this model can be used to correct distorted beliefs about God, his truths, their own identities and worth, their capacities, and their agency. I proposed that the framework can be used to help sufferers respond biblically to their oppression and to transfer their hope from their covenant with their spouses to their covenant with Christ, their covenant keeper, while honoring their marital covenant through loving confrontation, the seeking of help from church or civil authorities, and demonstration of attitudinal forgiveness and an earnest desire for the spouse's repentance and restoration.

In this dissertation, I have endeavored to provoke deeper thought within the church and counseling community about the weight we must give to verbal oppression in marriage and the urgency with which we should address it. I desire that counselors and pastoral leaders understand such oppression as grave and demonic sin—not just against

the spouse but also against the triune God, his purposes, his standards, and his design of the marital covenant and its evangelistic mission. I suggest that language is a precious gift to be stewarded—a truth lost in an age of social media.

At the conclusion of my research, my desire to understand the influence of language has grown. I ponder how much prophetic influence the church may have lost not only upon the inner dynamics of Christian marriages but even within society by not training members to steward language reverently in accordance with God's truths and purposes, reflecting his image rightly to others. Even as I understand speech as a product of the heart, I wonder how hearts might themselves, in reverse, be transformed as people learn to speak in accordance with a biblical theological-anthropological-moral-covenantal perspective. How might society be impacted by a church that takes seriously Christ's warning in Matthew 12:36–37 and the many passages that convey the life-giving and life-depleting potential of human language? My hope is that this dissertation will spur interaction and further research from scholars more gifted than me.

APPENDIX 1

MARITAL COMMUNICATION HABITS QUESTIONNAIRE

Counselors and ministry leaders can administer the Marital Communication Habits Questionnaire as an informal data-gathering tool to help assess whether verbal oppression is occurring in a marriage and, if oppression is confirmed, to gain an idea of its nature, severity, pervasiveness, and experienced effects.

Care providers should invite suspected recipients of verbal oppression to complete the questionnaire using the following guidelines:

1. It should be offered as soon as possible after verbal oppression is suspected.
2. Privacy and confidentiality should be ensured.
3. Physical safety should be considered the highest priority.
4. Completion should be voluntary and not coerced.

The possible responses for each item include “N” for “Never,” “S” for “Sometimes,” “O” for “Often, and “A” for Always. A Likert scoring scale is not recommended because the answers indicate frequency while the content of each item indicates the nature of verbal oppression. A respondent who circles “A” on item 3 but “N” on all other items would exhibit a low Likert score while living under the pervasive threat of harm. Therefore, this tool should be used as a means for gathering important insight from the suspected victim’s perspective in order to counsel more effectively.

This questionnaire may be repeated at intervals to help assess the oppressive spouse’s progress in counseling.

Marital Communication Habits Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions by circling the answer that best represents your experience:

N — the statement is ***never*** true
S — the statement is ***sometimes*** true
O — the statement is ***often*** true
A — the statement is ***always*** true

1. My spouse becomes irritated when my opinion differs from his/hers.	N	S	O	A
2. My spouse blames me when things go wrong.	N	S	O	A
3. My spouse threatens to hurt me and/or the children.	N	S	O	A
4. My spouse insists I do things his/her way.	N	S	O	A
5. My spouse insults me in front of others.	N	S	O	A
6. My spouse pretends he/she did not do or say things he/she did or said.	N	S	O	A
7. My spouse criticizes the way I look or dress.	N	S	O	A
8. My spouse manipulates me into doing things I do not want to do.	N	S	O	A
9. My spouse punishes me with silence.	N	S	O	A
10. My spouse accuses me of lying when I am telling the truth.	N	S	O	A
11. I have feared for my safety because of threats my spouse has made.	N	S	O	A
12. I question my own ability to make wise decisions.	N	S	O	A
13. It is more important to my spouse that I do what he/she wants than that I do what God wants.	N	S	O	A
14. My spouse threatens to take things I like away from me.	N	S	O	A
15. My spouse lies to me.	N	S	O	A
16. My spouse criticizes my body.	N	S	O	A
17. My spouse yells and/or curses at me.	N	S	O	A
18. I feel nervous or fearful when my spouse enters the room.	N	S	O	A

19. My spouse demands that I do things that make me uncomfortable.	N	S	O	A
20. My spouse says things that make me feel like a bad person.	N	S	O	A
21. Sometimes I feel crazy because of my spouse's accusations.	N	S	O	A
22. I feel depressed because of my spouse's words toward me.	N	S	O	A
23. My spouse accuses me of doing things I did not do.	N	S	O	A
24. I do not trust my spouse to consider my well-being when he/she makes decisions.	N	S	O	A
25. My spouse finds fault with most things I say or do.	N	S	O	A

APPENDIX 2

"WHAT DO MY WORDS DO?" INFORMAL GROWTH TOOL

"What Do My Words Do?" is an informal growth tool designed to help biblical counselors and counselees identify and assess motives, effects, and theological implications of the counselee's speech toward his or her spouse.

Design and Methodology. This tool is designed to be completed in dialogue between the counselee and the counselor. Additionally, it is designed for repeated use rather than one-time use, as the counselor helps the counselee over the course of multiple counseling sessions to distinguish between speech that honors God and accords with his design and purposes for speech and that which does not, using real-life examples of the counselee's words toward his or her spouse. Positive intentions of the heart and positive effects of words are included so that the counselor can also help the counselee to recognize, develop, and choose righteous uses of speech, to recognize the positive impacts of speech, and to image God's heart for his or her spouse through speech.

Purposes. In terms of *assessment*, the purpose of this tool is as follows:

1. To help the counselor assess the counselee's level of self-awareness in regard to his or her speech and the intentions of his or her heart.
2. To help the counselor assess the counselee's emotional intelligence level and his or her ability to experience empathy for his or her spouse.
3. To help the counselor customize his or her counseling plan according to the counselee's level of understanding.
4. To help the counselee assess the intentions of his or her own heart as well as the effects on his/her spouse.
5. To help the counselee recognize and assess whether his or her use of speech indicates a heart orientation toward God or away from him.

The *formative/educational* purpose of this tool is as follows:

1. To help the counselor teach the counselee that words are *actions* that (a) stem from the motives of the heart; (b) affect his or her spouse in positive or negative ways; (c) either honor or dishonor God by whether or not those words image God's heart toward the person's spouse, align with God's truth, and impart grace to all who hear, including his or her spouse.

2. To help the counselee build vocabulary (using both positive and negative terminology) and insight regarding heart motives.

3. To help the counselee build vocabulary (using both positive and negative terminology) and insight regarding the effects of his or her speech on the spouse.

4. To provide a basic framework from which the counselor can help the counselee learn theological truths regarding the nature, purpose, and function of language and begin to examine his or her speech through the lens of those truths.

5. To provide a basic framework from which the counselor can help the counselee learn that his or her use of language reveals the orientation of the (or "his or her") heart, toward God or away from him

With whom should this tool be used? This tool should be used with any counselee whose biblical counselor recognizes or suspects patterns of abusive speech in marriage or a general lack of understanding regarding the nature, effects, and theological implications of his or her speech in marriage.

WHAT DO MY WORDS *DO*?

Words I spoke to my spouse:

What did I seek to achieve with my words? (Circle all that apply or add your own):

Punish	Comfort	Demand
Bless	Commend	Threaten
Humiliate	Encourage	Coerce
Belittle	Gently confront	Praise
Condemn	Coerce	Thank
Affirm	Criticize	Impart hope
Reassure	Shame	Impart mercy
Accuse	Confuse	Make peace
Honor	Push away	Draw near
Instruct	Manipulate	Silence
Dominate	Deceive	Dismiss
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Did my words…

Align with God's words or the enemy's words regarding my spouse?

Honor my spouse's dignity as a bearer of the divine image or diminish it?

Image God's heart and his love toward my spouse or the enemy's hatred of my spouse?

Point my spouse toward the gospel and hope or toward despair and condemnation?

Help my spouse flourish in the gospel of peace?

Impart grace to all who heard, including my spouse?

Seek God's glory or my own satisfaction?

As the result of my words, my spouse experienced… (Circle all that apply):

Shame	Condemnation	Mercy
Hope	Affirmation	Humiliation
Guilt	Loss of agency	Defensiveness
Grace	Despair	Discouragement
Love	Reassurance	Sense of dignity
Comfort	Objectification	Humiliation
Appreciation	Desire to escape	Temptation*
Confusion	My appreciation	Affection
Blessing	Curse	Disapproval
Distance	Intimacy	Grief
Confidence	Silencing	Manipulation
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

**Temptation toward sin, such as suicidal ideation, substance abuse, or some other imagined form of sinful escape or comfort*

Who rules my heart?

How did my words reveal…
A. Love of God?
B. Love of my spouse?
B. Love of self?

How did I seek to please
A. God with my words?
B. My spouse (in sincerity) with my words?
C. Myself with my words?

Who was most served by my words?
A. God and my spouse?
B. Myself?

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ABSTRACT

A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING VERBAL OPPRESSION IN MARRIAGE

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In this dissertation, I argue that because language originates in the triune God, married image bearers are commanded to use language in ways that reflect God's character, function according to his purposes, and conform to his moral standards, to the benefit of their spouses and their marital covenant. Because the chief design purpose of language is love that builds up, verbal spousal oppression constitutes egregious violations against God, the spouse, and the marital covenant itself; such speech carries the power to detrimentally impact the spouse in both soul and body. Chapter 1 introduces the topic and presents my thesis and a survey of existing relevant literature. Chapter 2 illuminates the theological nature of language, emphasizing the triune God as language's origin and source and offering scriptural, historical, and contemporary support. Chapter 3 analyzes the anthropological nature of language, emphasizing its centrality to image-bearing as the mechanism by which humanity is empowered to know and commune with God and one another and to influence and shape one another. Speech-act theory is applied to highlight speech as intentional acts that induce intended or unintended effects upon hearers. Chapter 4 argues language is moral in nature and that humans, as moral agents, are responsible before God for how they use it. God's character, his Son, and his Word constitute the moral norms against which language should be assessed. Chapter 5 asserts that language is covenantal in nature and that its proper use is integral to forming and sustaining the marital covenant. Based on a complementarian perspective, I assert that

verbal oppression violates God's design and mission for marriage. Chapter 6 argues the misuse of language toward the detriment of one's spouse constitutes violations against God, the spouse, God's moral law, and the marital covenant itself. I adapt speech-act theory to present an anatomy of oppressive language. Chapter 7 discusses the implications of the preceding chapters and presents a theological-anthropological-moral-covenantal framework to apply in counseling those who verbally oppress their spouses and those who suffer verbal spousal oppression. Two tools are offered for use in counseling. Chapter 8 presents a summary and concluding thoughts.

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