Pierce Taylor Hibbs, M.A.R., TH.M.

Foreword by Vern S. Poythress

The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior

A Reformed Exposition of the Language Theory of Kenneth L. Pike

REFORMED ACADEMIC DISSERTATIONS

"Structural linguistics has generally ruled the day from Ferdinand de Saussure's famous *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) through various versions, including its American types, particularly in the work of Leonard Bloomfield, until our own times. Saussure's most-recognized critics include the enormously influential Noam Chomsky, as well as Jan Koster, who chided the earlier work as failing to recognize the full range of natural language, but did not put into question its secular fundamentals, which owe much to Immanuel Kant and his progeny. An unjustly ignored figure in this history is Kenneth L. Pike, a Christian, long associated with the approach of tagmemics, which faults structuralism for separating language from the person and his history. In this brilliant and lucid account, Pierce Hibbs invites us to rediscover Pike's contributions, adding to it a robust defense of the implications of his views for a Reformed and biblical faith. He boldly finds the ultimate source of all language in the divine Trinity. Fresh and compelling, it is required reading for anyone wishing to navigate the challenging field of linguistics and make Christian sense of it."
—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

"The last century has witnessed a major preoccupation with language among philosophers. Theologians, too, have often tried to understand the language of God—his Word. Often these studies have endorsed relativism of various kinds—the view that true communication is really not possible. Reformed theologians have resisted these relativistic theories. But more helpfully, some Reformed thinkers over the last century have developed a positive understanding of language, based on Scripture. This began with Vern Poythress's theological appropriation of the tagmemic system of Christian linguist Kenneth Pike. Pike's system emphasizes threefold distinctions: particle, wave, field; contrast, variation, distribution. Poythress finds in these triads reflections of the Trinity. Hibbs has written an excellent popular book about this development. The present volume contains the research

behind that book and sets it forth in a rigorous, technical, but very clear way. I have profited much from his formulations. This book will sharpen and encourage our thinking about the Trinity, the Word of God, and the centrality of language in a Christian understanding of the world."
—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

"Having mastered the linguistic philosophy of Kenneth Pike, mined the Trinitarian theology of Cornelius Van Til, and meditated on the creative thought of his mentor, Vern Poythress, Pierce Hibbs in this work peers into the interlocking mysteries of language and the Trinity. How fitting that he stands on the shoulders of this triad of scholars—Pike, Van Til, and Poythress—to offer his own stimulating perspective on these subjects. In brief, Hibbs argues that Pike paints a picture of language that analogically reflects the triune God, who upholds all things by the word of his power. The writing is crisp and clean, the content is full, and the case is made. Read, reflect, and rejoice!"
—**Carlton Wynne**, Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior

Reformed Academic Dissertations

A Series

Series Editor
John J. Hughes

The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior

A Reformed Exposition of the Language Theory of Kenneth L. Pike

Pierce Taylor Hibbs

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

For Christina,
who sacrificed so much so that I could finish this;
for my dad,
whom I wish was with me now;
and for Vern Poythress,
who first introduced me to the brilliance of Pike's theory
and whose friendship and support have been a Godsend

Contents

Contents

Series Introduction

P&R Publishing has a long and distinguished history of publishing carefully selected, high-value theological books in the Reformed tradition. Many theological books begin as dissertations, but many dissertations are worthy of publication in their own right. Realizing this, P&R has launched the Reformed Academic Dissertation (RAD) program to publish top-tier dissertations (Ph.D., Th.D., D.Min., and Th.M.) that advance biblical and theological scholarship by making distinctive contributions in the areas of theology, ethics, biblical studies, apologetics, and counseling.

Dissertations in the RAD series are *curated*, which means that they are carefully selected, on the basis of strong recommendations by the authors' supervisors and examiners and by our internal readers, to be part of our collection. Each selected dissertation will provide clear, fresh, and engaging insights about significant theological issues.

A number of theological institutions have partnered with us to recommend dissertations that they believe worthy of publication in the RAD series. Not only does this provide increased visibility for participating institutions, it also makes outstanding dissertations available to a broad range of readers, while helping to introduce promising authors to the publishing world.

We look forward to seeing the RAD program grow into a large collection of curated dissertations that will help to advance Reformed scholarship and learning.

John J. Hughes
Series Editor

Foreword

I am excited to see this book bring together two figures that up to now have usually not been considered together—the linguist and Bible translator Kenneth L. Pike and the Reformed apologist and theologian Cornelius Van Til. Kenneth Pike was a devoted Christian and a brilliant linguist. He offered a genuinely Christian and Trinitarian approach to language. But secular linguistic theory was moving in other directions as his theory blossomed and grew, and within his lifetime his work seldom received the attention that it deserved within the broader academic community. To some extent, analogous things might be said of Cornelius Van Til. During his lifetime he was appreciated by his students, but received a good deal of misunderstanding, rejection, and neglect from the broader community in philosophy, theology, and apologetics. In my opinion, both of these men were too radical, too penetrating, too innovative in a good sense to be immediately embraced. They were swimming against the tide.

These two men were not just contrarian. Primarily they were following in the path of loyalty to God and to their Savior Jesus Christ. They both in their ways appreciated the centrality of the Trinity and the centrality of the personal character of God. For Van Til, the centrality of God led to the centrality of human beings made in the image of God, and the centrality of human loyalty either to God or to man as a substitute god. That orientation of mankind toward loyalty or disloyalty made all the difference in apologetics. For Pike, the centrality of God led to the centrality of language—particularly the language of the Bible—and the centrality of human

beings as language users. For both thinkers, God, the true God of the Bible, was absolutely central. But in addition, human beings as full persons were indispensable to their fields of study. Van Til had human commitments of the heart squarely at the heart of his apologetics. Pike had human interaction with God and man squarely at the heart of his theory of language.

Both Pike and Van Til were deeply affected by the Trinitarian character of God. For Van Til, the centrality of God meant centrality of the true God, who is one God in three persons. Apologetics should not defend a bare monotheism, not further defined, but should defend the God who is, the God who is Trinitarian. For Pike, the centrality of persons led to triads of perspectives reflecting the Trinity. For Pike, language was not a bare abstract, but the gift of God. And that God, as the Trinitarian God, reflected his Trinitarian nature in the very structure of language. The affinities between Van Til and Pike are fascinating. Now we have before us a book that expounds those affinities. We are blessed by its insights.

The fruits arising from these affinities may be many. Among them I would suggest two for further attention.

First, the secular world is spinning out sophisticated but reductionistic, inadequate views of language. If we are Christians, we need something more robust than mere rejection, mere reaction. And we need to exercise more critical discernment than we show if we merely follow the latest philosophical or literary fads, with small attempts at identifying problems and adjusting to them. We need to ask positively about how language fits into a Christian worldview. Van Til supplies the Christian worldview directly, while Pike supplies the robust, anti-reductionistic view of language within that worldview.

Second, because language is central to human living, a number of secular visionaries are exploring how to find our way in human living through sustained exploration of the nature of language. In the minds of these visionaries, everything is "interpretation." We can profit from a Christian analogue to such exploration of

language. And Hibbs's book gives us a beginning and a foundation, by expounding the significance of Kenneth L. Pike to the larger world—not only the linguistic world, but the world of theology and human life.

Vern S. Poythress
Professor of New Testament Interpretation
Westminster Theological Seminary

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my wife, first and foremost, for her help with this project. She has written none of it, and she has written all of it. Advanced study, I am reminded now more than ever, is a family affair. Thank you, Christina, for doing this with me.

I would also like to thank Dr. Poythress, who first directed me to the work of Kenneth Pike. We have had many illuminating discussions on Pike's approach to language and life, and I am sure that I would not understand the extent, applicability, and impact of Pike's work were it not for his help. He has succeeded, to his joy I'm sure, in making me a full-fledged Pikean. His friendship and guidance have been a great blessing to me.

I am also grateful for Leslie Altena's guidance and support throughout this project and for her relentless enthusiasm and passion as a language teacher. By simply working with her, I have learned more about language than I can express.

Abbreviations

Bib Sac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
CVD	Contrast, Variation, Distribution
FMD	Feature, Manifestation, Distribution
GPR	Grammar, Phonology, Reference
IJST	*International Journal of Systematic Theology*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
LC	Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1982.
LRUT	Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. Paris: Mouton, 1967.
PWF	Particle, Wave, Field
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*

1

Introduction

What does language have to do with the Reformed doctrine of the Trinity? What do a Connecticut-born linguist and a Dutch Reformed apologist have in common? These two questions lie at the base of this project. Answers to each question should be clear by the end, but it will help at the outset to provide an apology for the union of language theory and Trinitarian theology, for such an apology raises a pivotal theological point: language theory and theology proper are inextricably intertwined.[1]

Language Studies and the Trinity

Recent academia and Reformed theology have witnessed an insurgence of interest in language studies and the Trinity, respectively.[2] Why is this the case? Certainly, many reasons could be offered

---

[1] Another way of putting this is to say that "language reflects God in his Trinitarian character. We can appreciate language more deeply, and use it more wisely, if we come to know God and understand the relation of God to the language we use." Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 9.

[2] With regards to linguistics, consider a selection of titles from the last decade: *The Language of Symbolism: Biblical Theology, Semantics, and Exegesis* (2006), *The Unfolding of Language: An Evolutionary Tour of Man's Greatest Invention* (2006), *How Language Works* (2007), *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (2007), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*

based on the secular and Christian book markets, but I propose one that is more theological than market-driven: language and the Trinity go hand in hand because the Trinity is a communicative being, and language is an image-bearing capacity of communicative creatures bound in covenantal relationship with that being.[3] Theologically

---

(2008), *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (2009), *Speaking of God: Theology, Language, and Truth* (2009), *The Truth (and Untruth) of Language: Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Derrida on Disclosure and Displacement* (2010), *The Incarnation of the Word: The Theology of Language of Augustine of Hippo* (2011), *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (2011), *Language, Cognition, and Human Nature: Selected Articles* (2013), *The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology* (2014), *The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language* (2014), *The Language Myth: Why Language Is Not an Instinct* (2014), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Culture* (2014), *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Analysis* (2015), *The Oxford Handbook of the Word* (2015), and *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature* (2015). With regards to the doctrine of the Trinity in the broader Reformed tradition, a list of selected titles is just as lengthy, even if we begin in 2010: *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (2010), *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (2011), *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (2012), *The Trinity and the Vindication of Christian Paradox: An Interpretation and Refinement of the Theological Apologetic of Cornelius Van Til* (2014), *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (2015), *Traces of the Trinity: Signs of God in Creation and Human Experience* (2015), and *One God in Three Persons* (2015). Publication trends are not arbitrary; they reflect the interests of the day. Clearly, in our day the interest lies in language and the Trinity. These are perhaps perennial topics of interest, as they should be, but that does not discount the importance of studying the relations between them.

[3] "The fact that the eternal Son of the Father is called Word or *Logos*, seems to mean, among other things, that there is—and has been from all eternity—talk, sharing and communication in the innermost life of God. The true God is not silent; He talks." Douglas Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in Light of the Church*, vol. 1, *The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2008), 487. "Language is wonderful and mysterious. It is so because it is a gift of God to us. It reflects and reveals him. . . . According to the Bible, God himself can speak, and does speak. We are made like him, and that is why we can speak. When we use language, we rely on resources and powers that find their origin in God." Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 9.

speaking, it would be curious to witness a rising interest in language *without* concurrently witnessing a rising interest in theology proper. To study God 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.[4] In this regard, scholars who study one and completely ignore the other tend to walk with a limp.[5]

That both content areas are drawing attention simultaneously in our day means the time is ripe to continue the discussion of the centrality of language to all of life, not because language is a biological faculty that sets the human race apart, but because language is a divine behavior rooted in God himself and thus reflects his character in its depth and complexity. And included in "all of life" is

[4] "The New Testament indicates that the persons of the Trinity speak to one another. . . . Not only is God a member of a language community that includes human beings, but the persons of the Trinity function as members of a language community among themselves. Language does not have as its sole purpose human-human communication, or even divine-human communication, but also divine-divine communication." Ibid., 18.

[5] This is not to say that one cannot focus on either language studies or theology proper. Such a focus would be what Poythress calls an "emphasizing reductionism," which is unavoidable. "Exclusive reductionisms" are the problematic sort because they insist on "the exclusive correctness of one's own form of emphasizing reductionism." See Vern S. Poythress, *Philosophy, Science, and the Sovereignty of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1976), 48–49. In this case, I am arguing against exclusive reductionisms that ignore language studies or theology proper *even when the opportunity for acknowledgement presents itself*. For example, in theology proper, we might discuss language theory, or at least mention it, when referring to the immanent Trinity and the interpersonal relations of the Father, Son, and Spirit. God communicates—he "speaks"—with himself, so why not reflect on the nature of language at this point? For details on speech as an essential attribute of God, see John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 522–23. In language studies, when we search for either the root of our communicative faculty or the purposive nature of linguistic behavior, it would seem apropos to reflect on the Trinity as a communicative being or at least to reference God's utterly purposive and effective speech (Isa. 55:10–11).

our doctrine of God himself. But what, exactly, is the connection between our understanding of language and theology proper?

Language Theory and Theology Proper

I noted that language theory and theology proper are "inextricably intertwined." What do I mean by this? Language and the Trinity are clearly related, as suggested above, but there is more to this connection than a vague relation.

It seems to me that language theory and theology proper have their roots woven together in the soil of revelation, both general and special. Our communicative capacity and our knowledge of God are bound together because the world itself is linguistic, since it has been spoken into being, and because God's special revelation has been delivered in language, in words.[6] Jonathan Edwards wrote long ago, "As the system of nature, and the system of revelation, are both divine works, so both are in different senses a divine word. Both are the voice of God to intelligent creatures, a manifestation and declaration of himself to mankind."[7] We might clarify this by saying that nature is not itself verbal communication of the creator, but rather a spoken channel through which we receive divine revelation, and in

---

[6] I set this out in more detail in "World through Word: Towards a Linguistic Ontology," *WTJ* 79, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 345–64. Along these lines, Bavinck writes that "the world itself rests on revelation; revelation is the presupposition, the foundation, the secret of all that exists in all its forms." Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953), 27. Perhaps even more relevant is Poythress's claim that "If indeed God spoke to create the world, then the world from its beginning, and down to its roots, is structured by God's language. Language is not an alien imposition on the world but the very key to its being and its meaning. And if God governs the world even today through his word, then language, God's language, is also the deepest key to history and to the development of events." Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 24.

[7] Jonathan Edwards, "The 'Miscellanies': Number 1340," in *Christian Apologetics Past and Present*, vol. 2, *From 1500*, ed. William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 237.

that sense, it "speaks" of God. Special revelation, however, is unique as the *verbal* communication of God. Nevertheless, both general and special revelation are linguistic in the sense that the former is spoken into being and upheld by the Word of God's power (Heb. 1:3) and the latter is God's actual communication to creatures within the arena of general revelation. Thus, we can say that we know God by way of inherently linguistic revelation (in nature and in Scripture), which is simply a restatement of Cornelius Van Til's *revelational epistemology*.[8]

This revelation is itself reflective of the Trinity. Consider the question that Ralph Smith poses and answers:

> Why should God reveal himself? Because He is a triune God for whom the eternal fellowship and mutual communication of Father, Son, and Spirit is essential. It is not possible to imagine the Christian God not communicating because communication is an aspect of His covenantal life as God. Why would God reveal Himself in words? Because there is

---

[8] "The creation of God is a revelation of God. God revealed himself in nature and God also revealed himself in the mind of man. Thus it is impossible for the mind of man to function except in an atmosphere of revelation. And every thought of man when it functioned normally in this atmosphere of revelation would express the truth as laid in the creation by God. We may therefore call a Christian epistemology a *revelational epistemology*." Cornelius Van Til, *In Defense of the Faith*, vol. 2, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 1. Note that "Christian philosophy is a way of restating what God has authoritatively revealed about Himself, the world, man, etc.—the Christian worldview—and thus the way in which we know anything at all is first and foremost a matter of revelation." Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 164. See also John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 115–19. For an introduction to revelational epistemology in more plain language, see G. K. Beale and W. Andrew Hoffecker, "Biblical Epistemology: Revelation," in *Building a Christian World View*, ed. W. Andrew Hoffecker and Gary Scott Smith, vol. 1, *God, Man, and Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 193–216.

something about human language that is so perfectly analogous to the communication of the Persons of the Trinity that the Second Person may be called the Word of God. Human language is an analogue of one of the modes, perhaps the most important, of divine communication. For God to have given us verbal revelation, then, is what we would have expected.[9]

Our knowledge rests upon the revelation of this triune God and is only valid when received in covenantal submission to him, specifically in submission to Christ's LORDSHIP. Thus, "no sinner knows anything truly except he knows Christ, and no one knows Christ unless the Holy Ghost, the Spirit sent by the Father and the Son, regenerates him."[10] This is especially the case with language itself, which is part of revelation and gloriously reflects the Trinity. So, Van Til is not exaggerating when he writes that "no human can utter a single syllable, whether in negation or affirmation, unless it were for God's existence."[11] Apart from the Trinity, language itself would be vacuous.

[9] Ralph A. Smith, *Trinity and Reality: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2004), 72. On revelation as Trinitarian, see Kelly, *The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity*, 261; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 48; Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 359–60. Letham also notes on page 411 that "the God who has made himself known for our salvation has revealed himself to be triune," and "only by the gracious action of the Trinity, breaking into our darkness and death and arousing us to new life, can we ever know him." This Trinitarian revelation, we must remember, is not merely creative; it is also redemptive, and "the foundations of creation and redemption are the same. The Logos who became flesh is the same by whom all things were made. The first-born from the dead is also the first-born of every creature. The Son, whom the Father made heir of all things, is the same by whom he also made the worlds." Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 27–28. On the link between the Trinity and redemptive revelation, see B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968), 55–56.

[10] Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 5.

[11] Ibid., 11. See also Pierce Taylor Hibbs, "Imaging Communion: An

Because of the intrinsically linguistic nature of reality, which was spoken into being by the self-communicating, tripersonal God, we come to know what we know by language—either by God's creational language made manifest in the world around us (and within us) or by God's direct verbal address to his people in history.[12] All knowledge of who God is and what he is like (theology proper) is, in this broader sense, linguistically mediated.[13]

Thus, language theory and theology proper are bound up with one another because both are Trinitarian; both are mysteriously incomprehensible and yet vital to our everyday existence.[14]

Argument for God's Existence Based on Speech," *WTJ* 77, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 35–51.

[12] "External and objective revelation demands an internal revelation in the subject." Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 348. Also see Frame, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, 37–39.

[13] Van Til offered a schematic for the various means of revelation. We can receive revelation *about* nature, man, and God; we also receive revelation *from* nature, man, and God. But in every case, we cannot pull ourselves away from the fact that all such revelation is linguistic: nature and man were spoken into being; man is a communicative creature; and God is the self-communing Trinity. Though it is important to remember that, to us, general revelation is nonverbal in the sense that God speaks *through* it but not *in* it (whereas *in* Scripture we have the very speech of God to us), we can still say that language, in some sense, pervades every particle of reality. Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 121–22. See also Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 75–83. On the inescapable nature of revelation, see ibid., 174–78. On the necessity of God's revelation for our knowledge, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 34–35.

[14] We will deal with this periodically when discussing God's incomprehensibility. For now, note that "we see in God himself the logical origin for the words in language. Words do not come out of nowhere. Out of his bounty, his goodness, God has supplied human beings with all the words in each particular language. He has not given words in isolation, but words that are tied to and related to one another in their meanings, their sounds, and their ability to form constructions that communicate rich truths. And it is not a gift that is

All of this means that language is profoundly Trinitarian, and the Trinity is profoundly linguistic! What we think of one has repercussions for what we think of the other. If we consider language a mere vehicle of thought, what does that say about our understanding of God?[15] Perhaps it says that we may be tempted to see God as a vehicle for blessings or as an instrument for advancement. If we

---

unrelated to the Giver. The gift reflects the Giver in mysterious ways. Words, with their ability to describe, reflect God who describes himself, as is hinted at in his self-description, 'I am who I am.' God describes himself to himself in the communication and communion of the persons of the Trinity, in unity and diversity. And then that unity in diversity is reflected in the unity (contrastive-identificational features), diversity (variation), and interconnectedness (distribution) that exist in any one single word." Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 279. Also consider Oliphint's words on theology proper, particularly the relation between God's simplicity and his triunity: "Surely there is mystery in God's simplicity; perhaps nothing is more complex than God's simplicity! There is mystery, in other words, in God's triunity. These biblical truths, which we must affirm, go together. And yet, even as we affirm them, we have no laws of thinking or experience that show us exactly *how* these aspects of God's character actually cohere. They do cohere; there is no darkness or mystery in God. But we cannot see exactly *how*—not in this life, nor in the next." K. Scott Oliphint, "Simplicity, Triunity, and the Incomprehensibility of God," in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 229.

[15] In terms of the medium of writing, this would be akin to the *surrogational model*, in which "what a sign signifies is explained in terms of its being a surrogate or substitute for something else." Roy Harris, *Signs of Writing* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 50. We might think here of Plato's *Cratylus* and other logocentric models of signification. Logocentrism, in brief, "stands for the harmonious alliance between reality, thought, and language." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 60. There is certainly truth to the surrogational approach, and I am not opposed to our thinking that, in some ways, written words are "surrogates" of thoughts, but they are much more than that. I believe words are also instruments for communion, which highlights not just *what they are* but *what they do*, in a more Trinitarian sense. Temporal words foster communion because the eternal Word has intimate communion with the Father and Spirit.

think of God as an impersonal monad or absolute, what does that say about our understanding of language?[16] Perhaps we may fail to see language as a means of fostering communion, and so we use words out of a sense of selfish ambition rather than out of a love for communal peace in the body of Christ. Of course, these are generalities, but that does not mean there is no truth to them. The point is that our understanding of language, which might be thought of as peripheral to our theology, is actually at the center of it. That is why it is so critical to be conscious of our approach to language.

An Apology

Now that we know a bit about the relationship between language theory and theology proper, we should clarify why this project is an appropriate setting to investigate that relationship further. To start, we might ask, why is it so important to add this particular study to the queue of theological books and monographs dealing with the nature and structure of language, or with the doctrine of the Trinity? To say that language and the Trinity are topics of current interest is one thing, but why does the theoretical convergence of a Connecticut-born linguist (Kenneth Pike) and a Dutch Reformed apologist (Cornelius Van Til) warrant our attention?

My simple answer to the question may seem presumptuous, but I do not think it is an exaggeration. Given what we know

---

[16] This would follow in the footsteps of Plato's rather nebulous "unifying principle" of *the Good*, which "gives being to the objects of knowledge and so is, as it were, the unifying and all-comprehensive Principle of the essential order, while itself excelling even essential being in dignity and power . . . . The Idea of the Good gives being to the Forms or essences of the intellectual order, while science and the wide ocean of intellectual beauty is a stage on the ascent to the essentially beautiful. Plato is clearly working towards the conception of the Absolute, the absolutely Perfect and exemplary Pattern of all things, the ultimate ontological Principle." Frederick Copleston, *Greece and Rome: From the Pre-Soctratics to Plotinus*, A History of Philosophy 1 (New York: Image Books, 1946), 176.

about language as an image-bearing gift of God, and given what the Reformed tradition holds about the centrality of the Trinity, the joint study of these two thinkers seems to offer a unique and biblical exposition of the nature of language. If language is an image-bearing gift of God, then it should be appreciated for its divinely-endowed potency and depth. If the Trinity is the centerpiece of Reformed theology, then we should have a distinctly Trinitarian approach to language that accounts for the depth and incomprehensibility of the Godhead. This is where the language theory of Kenneth Pike and the theology of Cornelius Van Til merge. At the intersection of their thought, we find a truly Reformed and Trinitarian understanding of language—an understanding that is faithful to the biblical witness and calls upon linguists and theologians alike to bow in awe before the God who spoke the world into being and upholds it by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3). I am not suggesting that this is the only way to view language, but it is certainly an important one that deserves our attention. The Reformed tradition needs to see just how insightful and methodologically felicitous Kenneth Pike's approach to language was, especially in conjunction with key Van Tillian teachings. However, as we will see, Kenneth Pike extends this even further, for if language is a phase of human behavior, then we can easily extend what we have learned about language to the rest of life, hence the title: *The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior*.[17]

The Outline of What Follows

In the pages that follow, we first focus our attention on the language theory of Kenneth Pike. Next, we expose the Trinitarian structure of Pike's approach and then note key areas of overlap between his thought and that of Cornelius Van Til. We will conclude with

---

[17] On the benefits of expanding a perspective to include all of reality, see Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 24–28.

some reflections on Pike's language theory as it relates to metaphysics and epistemology. Throughout the project, I will reinforce the thesis that *Kenneth Pike's language theory offers us a picture of language that faithfully represents the incomprehensible, Triune God of Scripture.*