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Language: A Few Observations from a Biblical Perspective

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In the beginning, God—
Father, Word, and Spirit—
called this world into being
out of nothing,
and gave it shape and order.
The world was filled with sound, variety,
and beauty;
it provided room for
a frown and a smile,
gestures and facial expressions,
questions and answers,
praises and songs.
In the beginning
all of these things were very good.¹

In the beginning speakers and listeners were very good, because it was God who had created them. Human speech—and hearing organs—

were created good. Both verbally and nonverbally people were able to clarify themselves because God is the one who made it possible for people eventually to function lingually in thousands of languages and dialects.

The Genesis account repeatedly states: "And God said." These "God says"—this speaking of God is an anthropomorphic explanation of how God revealed his divine power in his creation. After God's creative Word for light there was the good light, which separated it from darkness. First God created light to measure an orderly rotation of dark and light periods and then God *called* these "day" and "night." Also after God completed the separation of the water under the expanse from the water above it, God *named* the expanse "sky." Likewise, after God completed the gathering of the water under the

sky to one place, God *named* the dry ground "land" and the gathered waters "sea."

These first three days God completed the perimeters for his creation. God himself gave each a name and in this manner he defined the boundaries for human time and location. On the third day God also filled the land and sea with all sorts of vegetation—creating a beautiful garden for human beings and animals.

The following three creation days God created sun, moon, and stars, all sorts of animals, and Adam. We read that God brought the beasts of the field and the birds of the air to Adam to see what he would name them; and whatever Adam *called* each living creature, that was its *name*. In order to understand this linguistic act of naming we must assume that Adam used existing language forms. Clearly, the Genesis account gives evidence that language forms were present because God communicated from the very beginning with Adam. In Gen.1:28-30 God covenanted the cultural mandate with Adam, and in Gen. 2:16,17, God instructed Adam about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Using linguistic building blocks of the first language, Adam named the many creatures, all according to their kinds. Adam chose a unique name for each kind, thus carrying out his linguistic mandate. Adam's vocabulary kept on expanding, and the new words had divine approval because each name expressed the full essence of God's creatures.

In Paradise God and man spoke the same words; Adam and Eve were perfectly able to image God linguistically and otherwise as his representatives on this earth and to live in loving communion with their Maker. In Paradise, language was perfect and served as the basis for meaningful dialogue between God and his human creatures. God's words and Adam and Eve's words were meaningful, clear, and true. The real essence of the living creatures, of the cultural mandate, and of the tree of knowledge of good and evil were clearly understood. After God created Eve, Adam's naming of Eve reached aesthetic heights. The miraculous creation of Eve out of his rib filled Adam with inexpressible joy.

This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'co-man,'²
for she was taken out of man (Gen. 2:23).

Adam *understood* how the co-man had been created by God; he *understood* that man and co-man belonged to each other and how they formed a whole; he *understood* the social unity of man and co-man; he *understood* the matrimonial unity of man and co-man. And because Adam *understood* the full meaning of all the man-co-man semantic features, he was able to clarify these in the generic name he gave to Eve.

So far, we have seen language functioning at its best. But soon after this, Adam and Eve listened to the intruder's voice.

Rather than living by the Creator's
true word of life,
they fell for Satan's lie and sinned.

Adam's poetic exultation was soon overshadowed by the lie of Satan. Rather than living by the word of life our first parents fell for the words of death.

The serpent's opening statement came as a half-truth. The Hebrew "You must *not* eat from *any* tree in the garden?" can be understood in two ways. It can be read, "not from *every* tree," or "not from *any* tree." The double meaning of this question aroused suspicion in the mind of Eve. Words of death, shrouded in ambiguity, were as arrows darted at Eve's heart. These words instilled doubt in the heart of the woman; they served to raise questions about the fairness and justice of the divine command. Eve's answer showed that the arrows had found a target. Instead of Eve referring to the tree as "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," the name which God had given it, she referred to it as "the tree that is in the middle of the garden." Eve described the tree by its location, not by its true nature and significance. Besides, the location of this tree is not clearly described by Eve, because God had placed two trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in the middle of the garden.

Furthermore, Eve twisted the truth of God's command. God's words, "When you eat of it you will surely die," (Gen. 2:17) became "You must not touch it, or you will die" (Gen. 3:2). The true and clear words of life spoken by God and Adam contrast with the deceiving and ambiguous words of death uttered by Satan and Eve.

The responses of Adam and Eve to God's questions were evasive, Adam and Eve both blamed someone else. Listening to Satan's lies

keeps providing for language. The internal laws for language still hold. Human beings as language users still have the irresistible will to clarify themselves, but now they speak often in a corrupt manner.

Language, like the rest of creation, is pregnant, being in birthpains for a renewed language. This explains why there is a painful tension present in language. Evidence of this tension can first of all be found in language forms and meaning. The tension all language

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immediately resulted in a breakdown of communication between God and human beings.

However, in his just anger
God did not turn his back,
on a world bent on words of death;
he promised them more words of life.

The promise of Gen. 3:15 is the good news for language users, for language forms, and for meanings. Although the words of death shackle our whole being and our use of language, God's redemptive words of life will ultimately set God's chosen people free and his redeeming power will permeate our whole being and language as well. Truly reborn language users look forward to the time that they will be able to communicate unambiguously with their Maker and with other creatures.

Language, like the rest of creation, is subject to sin. Language is corrupted, but it has not become entirely meaningless because God

users undergo can best be described with the tension that exists between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Linguistic competence is defined as the knowledge speakers have of the sounds, the meanings, the structure, the usage, the social convention, the physical world, personality, and so on. Linguistic competence allows the speakers to arrive at ideal expressions, reflecting proper grammatical and communicative rules of language. Linguistic performance, however, can be affected by a variety of noncognitive disturbing factors, such as fatigue, switching of attention, distractibility, lack of memory, emotional excitement, drugs, and the like. Linguistic competence, thus, is *what* ideal speakers know about the grammatical structure of their language, which makes it possible for them to communicate effectively; and linguistic performance is *how* speakers utilize their linguistic competence with other speakers of the language in actual speech situations.

The fall into sin not only affects form and meaning of language, but may corrupt the message itself. The lyric of Lamech's song is an example of how the message of a linguistically competent utterance can be corrupted; the song shows Lamech's machismo and how he despised God's protection of Cain:

Ada and Zillah, listen to me;
wives of Lamech, hear my words.
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for injuring me,
If Cain is avenged seven times,
then Lamech seventy-seven times.
(Gen. 4:23,24)

The words fell off Lamech's tongue as curses, boasting his own strength to his wives.

When the people spurned God's love
by lusting after power
by building the Unity Tower
God confused their tongue
so they would name and subdue
all of God's creation.

Because people had spread over a part of the world already we may assume that before the Flood language dialects could have occurred. After the Flood the dialectization process could have continued with the eight people who came out of the ark. To what extent language really had diversified, we do not know. Genesis 11 reports that after the people had decided to settle in the Plain of Shinar there was one common language. By confusing their speech, God scattered the human race from their location in the Plain of Shinar. Hereby, God's primary goal was maintained, namely, that human beings subdue the whole earth. The outward unity of unbelief, which was strengthened by the man-made unity of language, was crushed, and God set the nations apart. For language, this instant dialectization process became the basis for further branching of many languages as nations carried out their linguistic task, each in their unique ways. Considering this event from a redemptive point of view we see that the scattering of the nations cried out for the coming of

the Christ, who was to be born out of one of these nations, and the nations waited anxiously for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

And God remembered the promise
to reconcile all of creation to himself;
he has come among us
in Jesus Christ,
the eternal Word made flesh.
And according to Jesus' promise
the Comforter was given to the church.
In pouring his Spirit on many peoples
God overcame the division of Babel;
now people from every tongue, tribe, and
nation
were gathered in the unity
of the body of Christ.

At Pentecost, Jews, who came from a diversity of nations and languages to Jerusalem, heard the apostles talk about God's great deeds, not in the sacred Hebrew language of the law and the prophets, which was the custom, but in their own languages: in the language of the Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, of the Mesopotamians, Judeans, and Cappadocians, of the Pontians and Asians, of the Phrygians, Pamphylans, and Egyptians, and of the Lybians, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs. No wonder that some of them were amazed, and that others who could not accept this new message accused the apostles of being intoxicated. No new languages were created there in Jerusalem, but the vernacular languages were sanctified. The Holy Spirit broke down the linguistic taboos and barriers such that the gospel message was completely understood by the new converts. At the same time the three thousand new Christians were prepared to witness to their native people within a week of their conversion.

Thus the Spirit thrusts
God's people into worldwide mission,
Telling those who want to hear
that this world belongs to God.
Together believers of all nations confess and
witness
that the rule of Jesus Christ covers the whole
world.

To follow this Lord is
to serve him everywhere,
without fitting in,
as light in the darkness,
as salt in a spoiling world.

Today, between the Fall and the Judgment Day, between Pentecost and Glorification, all human beings are able to function either verbally or non-verbally as a means to *clarify* that which is important for communication purposes. The Fall shows our imperfection. Pentecost teaches us that languages are sanctified. On Judgment Day we will be held accountable whether we use God's name in vain and whether we spoke well of our neighbors. In Glorification we will be able to communicate in a perfect praiseworthy manner.

Together with believers of all tribes and
tongues
we long for that day
when Jesus will return as triumphant king,
when the dead will be raised
and all people will stand before his judgment
when the new Jerusalem will come out of
heaven
when the dwelling of God will be with men
and when he will live with them,
when the glory of God will give abundant
light
for the nations to walk by
when on these nightless days
the glory and honor of the nations
will be brought into the city
when the people of the nations feed
themselves
on the leaves of the tree of life—
of the tree of life in Central Park.
Then the garden and the city will find each
other.
Then the holy, eternal equilibrium shall have
been reached.

This is how the apostle John sees the consummation of God's creation. Believers of all nations and races will pass through the city streets. The nations do not become a new creation, but they are renewed and glorified. The

leaders of the nations will carry the nations' cultural products into the city (Rev. 21:24). These cultural products are renewed and glorified, because nothing impure shall enter into it (Rev. 21:27).

What does this mean for language? The languages of all the nations and even your dialect will be spoken and heard in this city. But no longer in its imperfection; each utterance will be perfectly clear and meaningful and will be completely understood by all, because the linguistic tensions caused by sin will be removed. Moreover, the cultural products of language will be carried into this city. Among these linguistic cultural products we might recognize our memorized nursery rhymes, Indian smoke signals, Black English with its double negatives, and great literary works.

Once again there will be perfect communication between God and his people. No longer will it be necessary to hide the nakedness of sin before God's holy face because the righteous will be dressed in fine linen, bright and clean.

On that great tomorrow God's Words will be echoed by our words in perfect harmony, because all forms of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, will be trustworthy and true, because God himself has revealed himself through his Creation, through the Written Word, through the Word made Flesh, and now finally in his Glorification.

When will this take place?

We find the answer in Jesus' words: "Yes, I am coming soon."

And the church responds with: "Amen, Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20,21).

ENDNOTES

¹Throughout this paper various passages are used from "Our World Belongs to God—A Contemporary Testimony," *Agenda for Synod, 1986*, Grand Rapids, CRC Publications, 1986, pp. 315-329. These passages are direct quotations or paraphrases.

²The Anglo-Welsh word "co-man" expressed the womanly characteristics better than our modern English word "woman." The original Hebrew name for woman also reflects this co-relationship by adding a feminine suffix to the masculine word "man." Dutch Bible versions translated this name to "mannin" which comes closer to the original meaning than the Dutch word "vrouw."