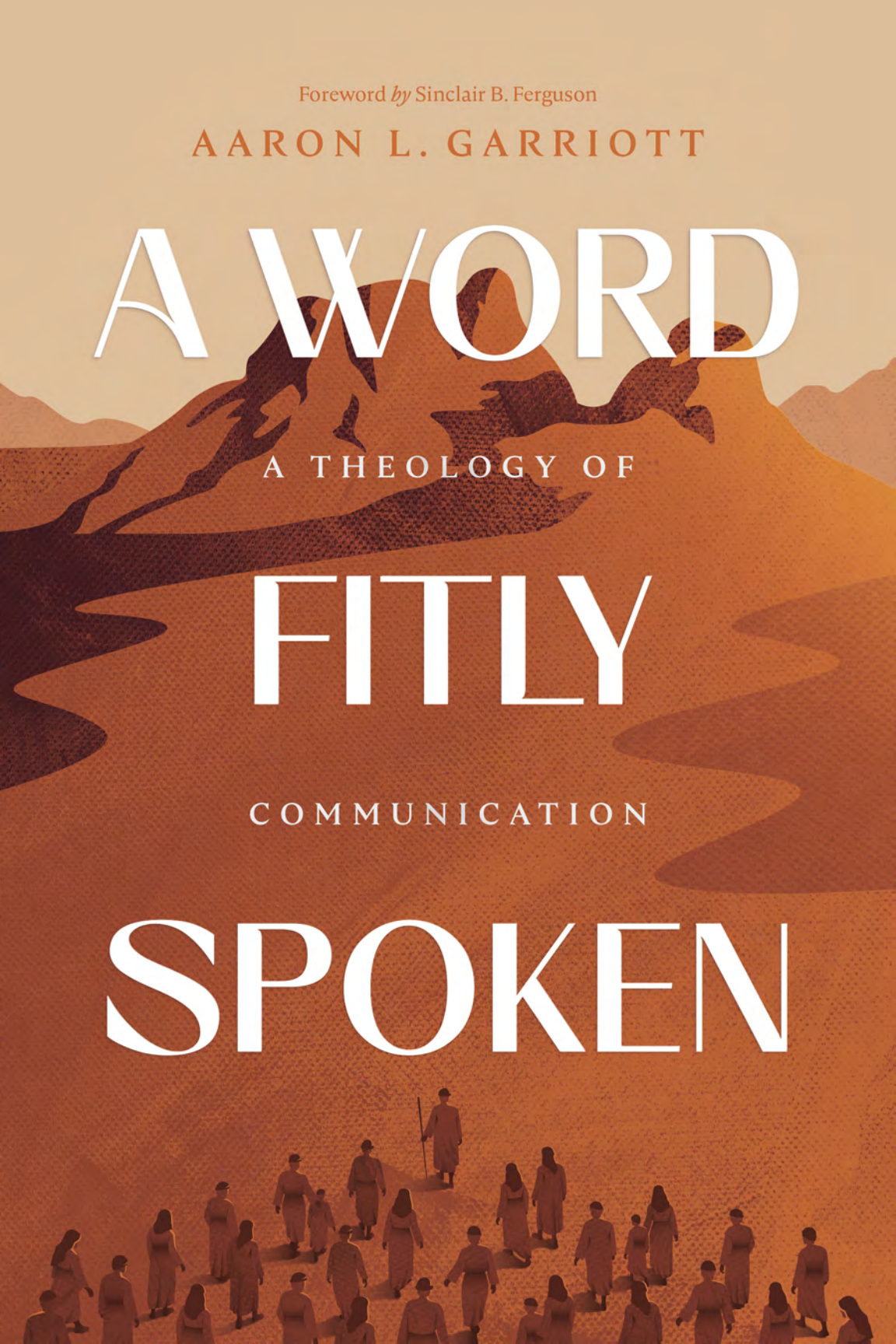


Foreword *by* Sinclair B. Ferguson

AARON L. GARRIOTT

A WORD



A THEOLOGY OF

FITLY

COMMUNICATION

SPOKEN

A Word Fitly Spoken

A Word Fitly Spoken

A Theology of Communication

AARON L. GARRIOTT



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

A Word Fitly Spoken: A Theology of Communication

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“A word fitly spoken is like
apples of gold in a setting of silver.”
(Prov. 25:11)

“Order this day all my communications according to thy wisdom,
and to the gain of mutual good. . . . May I speak each word as if
my last word, and walk each step as my final one.”

The Valley of Vision

“Morning Dedication,” 221

Foreword

Sinclair B. Ferguson

From as early as the fifth day, all the creatures that the Lord God made “according to their kinds”—the denizens of the deep and the beasts of the earth—were created with the ability to communicate. Evidence for this stretches from the careful research of marine biologists to the humdrum experience of dog owners who hope that their own interspecies communication will be understood and find an obedient response!

In this way, since shortly after the dawn of time, the triune God, whose own Being was the original sphere of communication and communion, has filled the world with miniature reflections of His own powers. He spoke into nothing—and behold His word communicated the capacity to communicate. And after a moment of intra-Trinitarian communication (“Let us make”), He created man, male and female—not “according to their kinds” but after His own kind. And thus He embedded in His image and likeness the ability to communicate and commune with each other in a way that surpasses every other creature. It is not surprising that from time immemorial, theologians have viewed this ability to communicate through words as one of the constituent elements of the *imago Dei*.

Communication, therefore, is an irreducibly *theological* phenomenon as well as an *anthropological* one. However (although I cannot comment here as an expert), I suspect it is the former dimension, the *theological* one, that is missing from most contemporary discussions of communication theory. The rejection of God in the Western world has gradually led to the deconstruction of human identity. Lose God and, predictably, we lose knowledge of ourselves as made in His image, and eventually—as is now happening—we lose the created distinctions and harmony between male and female. Inevitably, a parallel

deconstructionism has haunted communication theory. Just as our children are now pressed by secular forces to decide for themselves whether they are male or female or born in the right or wrong body, so students of literature are assured by their professors that since texts have no objective meaning, the reader is king. Few students will dare to risk their grades by asking how there can any longer be an objective standard of grading!

Against such a murky backdrop, Aaron Garriott's fine new work on communication deserves to be widely read and absorbed. For here is communication about the subject of communication that is built on a biblical-theological foundation. When this is added, as it is here, to an understanding of modern communication theory and an admirably easy style, we have a book that deserves to be placed in the category of "must read." It is not only informative, wonderfully clear, accessible, and interesting—it is also a very enjoyable read.

Aaron brings to his task a rare double expertise and sensitivity—in both biblical theology and communication theory. No doubt it will be of special interest to readers intrigued by either of these disciplines. But it is also apparent that what he has to say is important and applicable to us all—as a glance at the chapter titles will immediately indicate. For at the end of the day, and throughout every day, we are all, irreducibly, communicators. Since we are made in God's image, communication leading to interpersonal communion is the very stuff of life.

Communication theory has doubtless come a long way since Aristotle's work on *Rhetoric*. Yet in some ways what Aaron accomplishes here reminds me of what the philosopher discovered by common grace—that good communication is multidimensional. As is well known, Aristotle employed the analytical categories of *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*—Greek terms that scarcely need to be translated. He understood that we are complex individuals, with mental, moral, and emotional dimensions. We assimilate what is true and clearly expressed; we are disposed to trust communication from individuals whose personal character authenticates what they say; we have emotions, and therefore we respond to communication that is appropriate to the various affections of the human condition.

A Word Fitly Spoken has its own up-to-date ways of expressing these multiple dimensions. But unlike the work of the ancient philosopher, it is informed by the special revelation of God's Word as well as the light of nature.

It is therefore not only richer and more reliable, but it also shows us how patterns of good communication are applicable to the most basic areas of our lives as Christians.

It may be a reflection of my own interests, but it also seems to me that this book will be especially helpful for preachers and seminary students. Perhaps more books on preaching have been published in the past few decades than ever before in the entire history of the church; more investment has been made in “training”—in seminars on preaching and indeed in entire courses provided by seminaries or other organizations. The worst of these have downplayed content and emphasized style, but some of the best of them have tended to focus almost entirely on *hermeneutics* (the *interpretation* of Scripture) and paid less attention to *homiletics* (the *communication* of the message of Scripture). The result in some instances is that growth in *exegetical* skills has not been combined with growth in *rhetorical* ability (an area where the past masters who wrote on “sacred rhetoric” recognized the character, gifts, and individuality of the preacher himself). It is difficult, surely, to imagine that the Apostle John sounded like the Apostle Paul or the prophet Ezekiel when he preached! When the element of the individual himself is ignored or downplayed (his gifts, character, graces, personality, and experience), “training” tends to result in a kind of competent sameness, which, alas, very easily becomes dullness. The result, as someone once commented to me when reflecting on a decade of ministry that they had experienced, is that we may end up *well-educated* Christians but *poorly nourished* ones. I cannot easily forget the contents of the letter of appreciation that lay on the desk of the twenty-nine-year-old Robert Murray M’Cheyne—unopened on the day of his death—in which a hearer noted that it was not merely what he said “but the manner in which [he] said it” that left a lasting impression.

Here Garriott’s work should provide the stimulation needed by those of us who preach to reflect more widely on the nature of “sacred rhetoric” and grow in our ability to follow the lead of the Apostle Paul in giving ourselves to our hearers in the exposition of God’s Word that we offer them.

But this is only one of the values of *A Word Fitly Spoken*. For example, it also offers a bonus for all of us—and an important one. Its pages provide shrewd counsel in relation to the “new communication” technologies that have become virtually universal in the present century. In particular, it encourages

us to be sensitive to what we may be in danger of *losing* by the misuse of what we are *gaining*. The law of unintended consequences lurks everywhere; the technology that is a great servant can very easily become a tyrant master.

So there is much here to appreciate. We have been made in the image of God to live in and enjoy communication and communion with Him and with one another. We should surely strive to do that as well as we possibly can. As a privileged early reader of *A Word Fitly Spoken*, I am grateful for Rev. Garriott's wisdom and his stimulus to communicate better! I think you will be too.

Introduction

Who Made Man's Mouth?

It was an ordinary day for Moses. He had set out on his habitual journey of leading his father-in-law's flock alongside the desert to the base of a mountain. He was now eighty years old, having spent half his life in Midian, keeping Jethro's flock. As a shepherd, he was about the business of leading the flock to pastures that had sufficient food to be grazed. Moses had no reason to expect anything out of the ordinary as he led the livestock along the west side of the wilderness. It was a trip he had made thousands of times. Day after day, year after year.

When he arrived at Mount Horeb on this day, however, something strange caught his eye. When Moses looked, there was a flame coming out of the midst of a bush. It wasn't the mere sight of an inflamed plant that caused Moses to pause; rather, it was that the bush was unaffected by the flame. As Moses approached, the Lord uttered his name, and Moses replied: "Here I am" (Ex. 3:4). Then the Lord spoke:

"Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. . . . I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." . . .

. . . "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with

milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” (vv. 5–10)

After the Lord gave Moses this commission, Moses asked two questions: “Who am I [i.e., that I should carry out this mission]?” and “Who are You?” The Lord’s response is one of the most momentous occasions in redemptive history. He revealed His covenant name to Moses and revealed His plan to rescue the Israelites according to the covenant promises He had made to the patriarchs.

But Moses wasn’t so sure—he offered various excuses for why the plan was a bad idea. Would the Hebrews believe that Moses spoke for Yahweh? God demonstrated His power by turning Moses’ staff into a snake and his hand leprous. If this didn’t work, God said, no worries—He’d turn some of the water from the Nile into blood. Moses still wasn’t convinced. God’s plan might be a good idea, but Moses wasn’t the right guy for the job. He wasn’t eloquent. He was “slow of speech and of tongue” (Ex. 4:10). Although he “was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds” (Acts 7:22), Moses didn’t think of himself as a gifted orator. Couldn’t the Lord send someone else who was more articulate?

The Lord’s response constitutes the theological foundation for the present work’s aim: “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak” (Ex. 4:11–12). *Who has made man’s mouth?* The assumed answer, of course, is that the Lord created man’s mouth. The scope of the Lord’s creation of the mouth goes beyond the physical to include the *purpose* and *method* of man’s mouth. The Lord was taking Moses back to the very beginning, giving him a redemptive-historical lesson about words, language, and communication. The lesson is this: The Lord created man with the capacity to receive, interpret, and determine meaning and appropriately transmit this meaning through a system of symbols for a divine purpose—to dwell with the Lord and His people—and Moses was going to play a role in recovering that original purpose.

WHO MADE MAN'S MOUTH?

Moses' encounter with God illustrates the futility of studying communication, meaning, language, and words without considering God. God created man with the ability to communicate. What's more, He sustains communication. We would therefore do well to consider the beginning so that we can determine the end. That is, for what purpose did God create man's ability to determine and transmit meaning? Our answer to this question bears heavily on the way that we think about our responsibility to faithfully carry out these abilities. It also, as it was intended to do with Moses, instills within us confidence—namely, that when God determines for His words to accomplish a particular purpose by way of our words, that purpose must come to pass. God's people have long sought comfort in His promise through Isaiah:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isa. 55:10–11)

The study of communication must reckon with Moses' two questions (“Who is the Lord?” and “Who am I?”), whose answers are supplied in the Lord's rhetorical question to Moses: “Who has made man's mouth?”

This book seeks to trace the Bible's theology of speech and communication. Part 1 focuses on *God's* communication. Chapters 1 and 2 consider the triune God as the Creator of language and communication and the creation of man in the image of God, while offering a brief overview of the Lord's speech throughout redemptive history. Chapters 3 and 4 address the mediums of God's communication. Finally, chapter 5 discusses the *telos* (i.e., purpose or goal) of communication in God's beautiful design. These five chapters that make up part 1 lay the theological and biblical foundation for part 2. (If the reader finds part 1 too theologically dense or complex, they may wish to skip certain parts or move back and forth between parts 1 and 2.) Marking a shift into part 2 that focuses on *our* communication, chapter 6 situates

communication in the category of stewardship. Chapters 7 and 8 consider our communication *to* and *with* the God who speaks. The remaining chapters (9–17) address how to communicate to the glory of God in different situations and by different mediums.

Communication is like breathing. It's unavoidable, ubiquitous, and, often, unintentional. It encompasses everything we say and don't say, everything we do and don't do. One of the communication professors in my undergraduate studies offered a robust yet simple and clear definition of communication: "Communication is the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response."¹ Four features of this definition are particularly noteworthy. First, communication involves a *message*. This is the *what* of any conversation, interaction, or exchange. Second, communication involves a *relational process*. This is the *who* of any conversation, interaction, or exchange. Third, communication involves the *creation of a message*. This is the medium, or the *how* of any conversation, interaction, or exchange. Finally, communication involves *interpretation*, or the elicitation of a response. This is the goal, or the *why* of any conversation, interaction, or exchange. These four features are present whether it is God speaking or man speaking.

When I teach a course on the basics of communication to college students, I'm keenly aware that the course is not the one to which they most look forward when they arrive on campus. They've come to study Bible, theology, church history, and great works of literature. What could possibly be so thrilling about a course on communication? In fact, what *is* communication? Am I going to learn how to preach? Am I going to learn how to communicate better with my spouse? These initial impressions are entirely understandable, given the kinds of books on communication that appear in the Christian section of the library or bookstore. Most secular books on communication, on the other hand, tend toward the pragmatic. Very little published material explores communication, language, and speech from a truly Christian angle, let alone a Reformed theological perspective.

My hope for the class is by and large the same as the goal of this book: to reframe the way that we understand the art of communication, thereby

1 Em Griffin, Andrew Ledbetter, and Glenn Sparks, *A First Look at Communication Theory*, 10th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2019), 6.

making us more faithful, effective, and joyful communicators. To do this, we must set communication on a properly built theological foundation. Communication is fundamentally and profoundly theological. When the theology of the Bible informs how we understand communication, language, and speech, this understanding will be reflected in the way that we think about speaking and communicating as Christians.

Dr. R.C. Sproul (1939–2017) frequently expressed his desire to help flood the world with *knowledgeable* and *articulate* Christians in fulfillment of the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ. These two characteristics aren't exclusively delegated to vocational clergy. Yes, pastors should be knowledgeable and articulate, but Christ appointed the offices of His church *for the purpose of* "equip[ping] the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12). All Christians are to know *what* Christians believe (knowledge) and *how* to share it (articulation). The *knowledge* component of this mission is no doubt more exciting initially. It's thrilling to study the original biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, to see the glorious continuity of redemptive history and covenant theology in the Bible, to study the systematic theology of the Bible and the historic creeds and confessions of the church, to learn from the brightest theological minds of the church's past and present. At the same time, Dr. Sproul's emphasis on articulating that knowledge soberly reminds us that articulation devoid of theology is merely empty rhetoric. Paul said as much to the members of the Corinthian church, who seemed to raise rhetoric to the place of primacy in determining Apostolic credentials: "And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:1–5). At the same time, knowledge of the Bible and theology devoid of articulation renders that knowledge less effective. Knowledge and clear articulation must be wed for faithful and effective communication.

We are all recipients of truth. And truth comes to us in language. It comes to us in words and signs. We steward this truth faithfully by communicating

it clearly and boldly. It is within this theological framework that communication shifts from an academic discipline reserved for rhetoricians to an art of faithful stewardship and imitation—that is, we imitate God. Toward that end, this book is not a “how-to” but is more of a “come-see.” Come see all that the Bible and the rich heritage of the Reformed tradition have to say about communication, discourse, speech, language, and words.

We have the inestimable privilege as almighty God’s beloved children to confidently “draw near to the throne of grace” (Heb. 4:16)—for He has spoken to us (1:1–2) *and* He hears us (1 John 5:14). As we draw near to our loving heavenly Father, we experience a deeper and sweeter communion with the One in whom there was and is “no deceit” (Isa. 53:9), who has gone to “prepare a place” for us (John 14:3), whom we will one day see and hear as He is in all His revealed majesty, splendor, and glory (1 John 3:2). Until then, we confess together: “Because your steadfast love is better than life, my *lips* will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live” (Ps. 63:3–4, emphasis added).

Part One

DIVINE DISCOURSE: COMMUNICATION AND THE GLORY OF GOD

Communication is about communion—personal sharing. It employs words, language, signs, and speech (verbal and nonverbal) to convey messages for the sake of relational participation and fellowship. We speak to commune, and we commune by speaking. Just as the triune God communicates *Himself* to His image bearers, we who reflect His image also communicate *ourselves* using speech. If we are to appreciate our use of language, then, we must first understand the communicative God Himself *and* the purpose and end for which He created us with language and speech capabilities. Communication is thus inherently theological because God is a communicative Being who has created human beings in His image to commune with Him and with one another. Simply put, we communicate because God communicates. But does God really communicate? If so, how does He communicate? To whom does He communicate? What does He communicate? The Bible has much to say about these questions, so we begin by considering the theological foundation of communication, language, and speech.

A Communicative Being and the *Imago Dei*

Communication in the Trinity

What were your first words? Most of us can't remember, so we depend on the accounts of our parents. Yet it's true that our speaking had a beginning. There was a time when we couldn't speak. There was a moment when our cries turned to coos and a time when our coos morphed into intelligible words. Not so with God. God's speech had no beginning. As Augustine (AD 354–430) said, "God's 'speaking' is without beginning, and without end."¹ But who was God speaking to before He created? Tradition has it that a skeptic once asked Augustine a similar question: "What was God doing before He created?" Annoyed, Augustine replied, "Preparing hell for people who ask such questions."

Trinitarian Fellowship

While we can appreciate Augustine's humorous response, the question is not altogether inappropriate. In fact, we get a glimpse into what God was doing before creation when we look carefully at Jesus' High Priestly Prayer: "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I

¹ Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, ed. Philip Schaff, Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 1st ser., vol. 8 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 147.

am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). Jesus reveals here that before creation, the Father and the Son were engaged in communication with each other. We know from other texts that this communication also involved the Holy Spirit. In turn, this communication freely overflowed into creation when God made man *imago Dei* (i.e., in the image of God) and therefore capable of receiving communication from God and communicating back to Him—in other words, capable of enjoying communion with God.

It may seem odd to begin a book on the art of communication by discussing such lofty theological concepts as the Trinity and the *imago Dei*. But all knowledge is born out of true knowledge of God (Prov. 1:7). God’s triunity is the key to understanding not only God’s speech but how His speech relates to our speech, including the implications for how we use (and misuse) the gifts of language and communication. The Trinity underscores the foundational principle that communication did not originate with humans. As Mark Thompson writes, “It is not enough to speak of human language as a creaturely phenomenon that is commandeered, or even ‘sanctified,’ as a vehicle for divine self-revelation. God is himself the source of human language. He is the first speaker and invests language with a deep significance for generating and nourishing personal relationships.”² In other words, communication is first a divine characteristic and of divine origin that functions as the means of personal communion. Speech and language, therefore, are a theological exercise. This is why Vern Poythress argues, “Approaches that conceive of language *only* with reference to human beings are accordingly reductionistic.”³ Exploring methodology while ignoring theology will inevitably leave us frustrated in our attempts to communicate effectively and faithfully. To study communication is to humbly explore the eternal fellowship of our triune God, to ponder His ways, and to expand our understanding of God and of His images.⁴ If you want to know how to be a better communicator, a better speaker, a better listener, a better parent, friend, spouse, or sibling, if you want to relate to others

2 Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006), 166.

3 Vern Sheridan Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2009), 18.

4 See Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2018), 2–3, 6.

better, you must first look to our triune God. To know how to speak well, one must know God—Father, Son, and Spirit—who speaks according to the perfection of His communicative beauty: “The Mighty One, God the LORD, speaks” (Ps. 50:1).

To continue our Trinitarian exploration, we learn from Christ’s High Priestly Prayer that the triune God was enjoying love and fellowship within Himself before He created anything at all. The persons of the Trinity exist eternally in a sweet, mysterious, harmonious fellowship wherein “the Father [loves] and [gives] life to his Son in the fellowship of the Spirit.”⁵ This fellowship of the Trinity involves, as the seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706) describes it, “His immeasurable blessedness, in the most sweet fellowship of the persons, the unanimity in their joint counsels, by which the persons most perfectly know and love each other, rest in each other, and reciprocate their own perfection to each other.”⁶ Jesus hints at this fellowship earlier in John’s gospel: “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (John 5:26).

Among other things, this means that God has no need of anything or anyone—He has life in Himself as the triune God. It means that God has eternally possessed an object of His love: Himself, as He exists in three coeternal persons. The three irreducibly distinct persons of the Godhead have eternally delighted in one another and related to one another as Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father has eternally loved and begotten the Son. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father. The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son. And yet these three persons are one God, equal in power and glory. This is mysterious, but it’s also the foundation of the Christian faith.

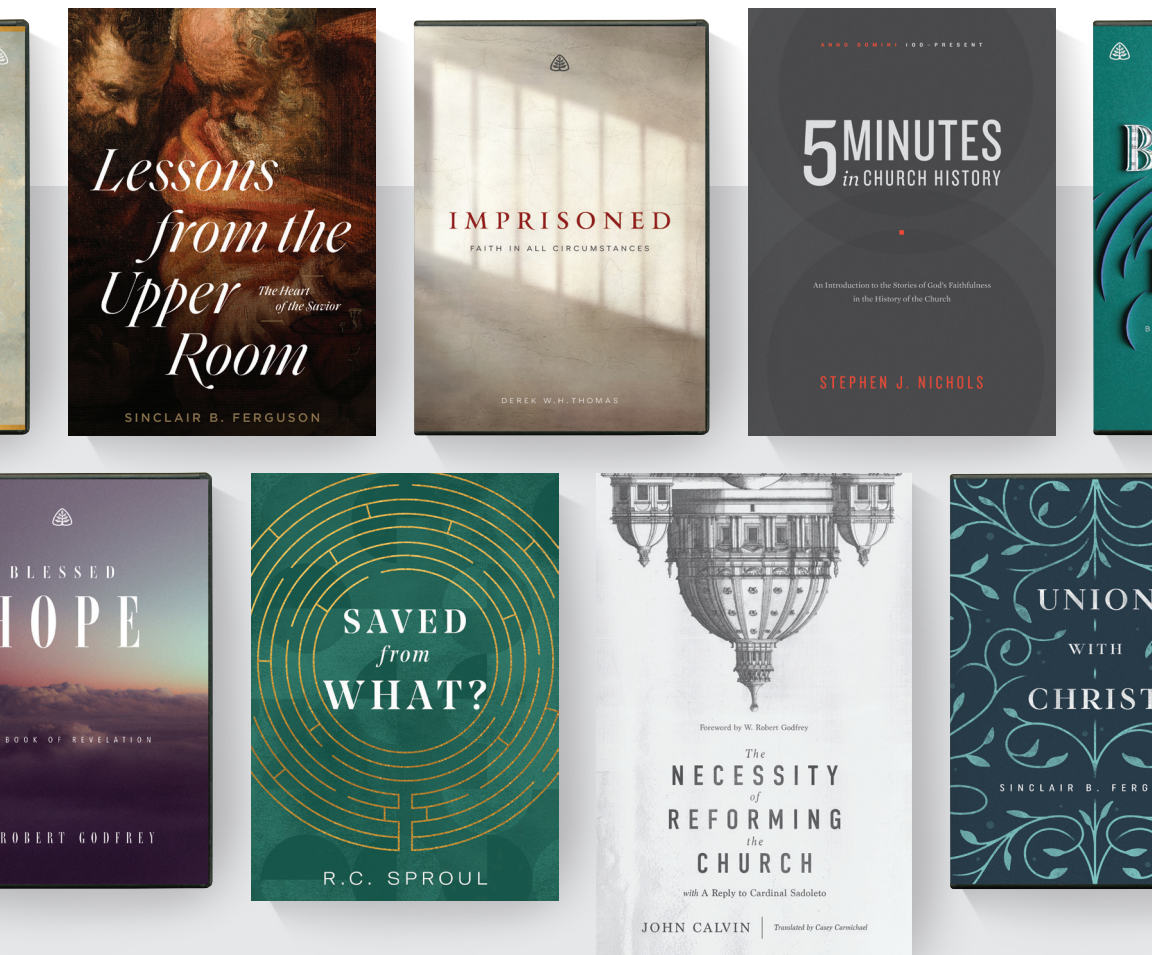
This elicits a question related to our earlier one. If God is eternally triune, which means that He has no need for anything outside Himself, then why did He create man? Just as a man creates a wooden table for his home only if he *needs* a table, doesn’t creation imply that God *needed* something?

The testimony of the whole of Scripture is a resounding *no*. God has no need of you or me. He has no lack in Himself. God didn’t create out of an inherent need for something or someone, as Paul tells the Athenians: “The

5 Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2012), 38.

6 Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 2, *Faith in the Triune God*, ed. Joel R. Beuke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage, 2019), 521.

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