

Vern Sheridan Poythress, *In The Beginning Was The Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009, 400 pp., pbk \$25, ISBN 978-1-4335-0179-1. Reviewed by Francine VanWoudenberg Sikkema (M.A. in Linguistics, Trinity Western University).

Introduction

Vern Sheridan Poythress, professor of New Testament interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia), proves himself competent not only in the field of theology (holding degrees in NT and apologetics), but also in the areas of mathematics and linguistics (having had several articles published in linguistics journals). Poythress is already the author of a number of books dealing with hermeneutics and science, and this latest volume of his is an impressive addition. Poythress dares to take a deeper look at language and its theological implications than I imagine most linguists or theologians would attempt. He proposes that language is yet another reflection of the Creator, even imaging the Trinitarian nature of that Creator. He states the goals of his linguistic study as follows:

I intend to exercise creativity in thinking about language. Of course we must first pay attention to the clear and direct things that the Bible has to say about God's speech, about man's creation, about Satan, and about redemption. But then we also go out and look at language. We use the insights from those who have studied language intensively. We endeavor to sift through good and bad, and creatively to relate the Bible's more explicit teaching to what we are learning about language. I invite others to go beyond what I say, and to explore further (p. 185).

The author shows the need for such a study by outlining the importance of language. It is central to so much of human life. Even activities which do not appear to involve language (such as washing dishes) are often done as a result of knowledge gained through language pertaining to that activity (such as health education). It enhances our lives, imparting greater significance to all that we do. For this reason, Poythress sets out on this journey of examining language, believing it will help to re-orient our lives. He presents his findings in six parts:

God's Involvement with Language (Chapters 2–10)

Language is not solely for the purpose of human-human communication. Poythress notes that God speaks first of all to himself, indicating divine-divine communication among the persons of the Trinity. This occurs prominently in his acts of creation. And when Jesus was on earth, he prayed not just as a human relating to the Creator, but as the *Son of God* speaking to *God the Father*. Poythress also recognizes distinct roles of the Persons of the Trinity that are reflected in language (and not the other way around!). These roles are: Speaker (the Father), Speech (the Son as "the Word"), and Breath (the Holy Spirit)—or, in the context of written communication: Author, Text, and Reader. He explores what he calls their *coinherence*, or the fact that they "mutually indwell one another" (p. 21). An example of this is the Father's wisdom *expressed* in the Word. The fact that human communication involves speakers, speech, and breath mirrors the reality of the Trinity, even when non-Christians use language. This reflects their dependence on God, the source of language. God is the "archetype" (the original), man the "ectype" (the derivative which images the original). This realization stands in sharp contrast to modern approaches to language, which assume it is

purely human, that is, that God either does not exist or...he can be factored out of the picture.... Otherwise, how could these disciplines hope to be scientific? But the aspiration of such disciplines to be scientific is itself loaded...and may already have introduced biases. So, according to the modernist viewpoint, God is emphatically not a participant in lingual and social communication. But from a biblical point of view, the move to exclude God ignores the single most important fact about communication and the most weighty ontological fact about language...and so we can only anticipate a multitude of repercussions when it comes to the detailed analysis of the subject (p. 38).

In addition to roles, Poythress identifies various *aspects* of God's communication. While recognizing that there are more than just these three, he focuses on those of *meaning* (reflected in God's omniscience),

control (omnipotence), and *presence* (omnipresence)—attributes that are also coinherent. This is shown in creation. God specifies the meaning of each created thing (e.g. “light”). His spoken command is powerful enough to make it come into existence. His involvement in the idea of light and the creation of it indicate his presence. When Adam names the animals, he is merely imitating God (who explicitly named things like Day and Night). Poythress goes on to explain three interlocking *perspectives* on language—the particle perspective (seeing language as composed of stable pieces), wave perspective (dynamic processes), and field perspective (relational)—which also turn out to be coinherent.

The rules of language are described and compared to the rule of God. For those unfamiliar with the difference between prescriptive grammar and descriptive linguistics, Poythress gives a helpful explanation on these two very different approaches to language. At times I felt uncomfortable with his assumption that the rules of language do not change, when clearly they do as languages evolve over time. But the author does qualify such statements with the recognition that rules can often only be said to be true in a particular place and time. Poythress also points out that we often fail to adequately understand and describe such rules, since “so-called natural law is really the law of God...imperfectly and approximately described by human investigators” (p. 67). Rules in language, as in any other context in which people are free to make choices, can also be broken. However, the fact that such rules can be broken does not take away from their value, since we still “need the rule to remain stable and unchanged in order effectively to break it” (p. 68). Poythress further states that language rules are obviously invisible, “ideational in character.... We see and hear only the effects of the rule on our use of language” (p. 68). He compares this to God’s invisible nature, known through his acts in the world. In the end, “the rules never succeed in making transparent why there is language at all, and why it is rational in the way that it is.... The profundity and mystery in language can only produce awe—yes, worship—if we have not blunted our perception with hubris” (p. 72). At this point, I anticipated some awe-inspiring concrete examples (of which there could be many, such as phenomena like recursion and built-in redundancy) but the author abruptly moved on to a new topic.

While it may seem all well and good to state that language reflects God’s perfect nature so beautifully, Poythress wonders with his readers what we are to make of the undeniable fact that many evils are accomplished through language. Lying, deception, slander, manipulation and all manner of wrong actions occur all the time. This is addressed with reference back to the fall into sin, treated in greater depth later on in the book where it says, “Language played a central role in the fall, and we may suspect that it continues to play a central role in the ongoing effects of the fall” (p. 104).

This section ends with some powerful principles for witness. Poythress reminds us that our evangelistic task does not involve introducing people to a God whom they have never known, but rather it involves pointing out to them that they “already know God as an aspect of their human experience in language and communication. This places the focus not on intellectual debate but on being a full human being within the context of life” (p. 80). I find this to be a very holistic and refreshing approach. The author recognizes that people’s denial of God is not an intellectual but a spiritual failure. We have to factor in human rebellion. As hard as it is to admit intellectual defeat, it is even harder for humans to admit moral failure. Furthermore, accepting the solution (Christ’s humiliating death in our place) is hardest of all to swallow. So, we should *expect* resistance when these truths are presented. Intellectual debate happens in the context of spiritual warfare, and thus must not be attempted without prayer. Also, the fact that we are fellow sinners ourselves should keep us very humble in our approach. We, too, have often given in to the “idolatry in which language is regarded as self-sufficient rather than dependent on God” (p. 81). I believe we would do well to bear these principles in mind as we attempt to address intellectuals.

Language in the Context of History (Chapters 11–19)

In this part of the book, Poythress looks at the larger components of language, even venturing into some metalinguistics. He explores how imaging in language is connected to how God is appropriately imaged in

Scripture. There is a fascinating section on transcendence (representing control) and immanence (representing presence) as they relate to both God's nature and the nature of language in human communication. At one point, he speaks of history as governed by "God's word, his language" (p. 97), referring to Christ. Is he saying that Jesus Christ *is* God's language? That was an abstraction I couldn't quite get my head around.

Eventually the author gets into actual world history. He implies that just as the existence of a story character proves the existence of the author, so our existence shows that of our Creator. Chapter 14 is where he really delves into the fall into sin, showing how it functions in the grand story of the world. It was very thought-provoking and thorough; it caused me to gain a much deeper understanding of the developments of the fall and what was underlying much of what was said by the devil in this event. For example, "Satan implies that God is not *present* in his word, but rather is presenting in his word a deceitful substitute for himself" (p. 112). From there, the author immediately moves on to redemption through Christ. An interesting aspect he explores is the cognitive dimension of Christ's suffering, noting that "Christ suffered cognitive darkness that we might receive cognitive light" (p. 118).

Having considered the fall and redemption, the author can now address smaller segments of world history. In this context he focuses on the diversity of languages resulting from Babel, and the accompanying diversity in peoples and cultures. Redemption involves overcoming the adverse effects of Babel (such as hostility). While this sometimes involves miraculous means (Pentecost), the Spirit does so progressively more by means of bilingualism and translation.

At this point, I appreciated Poythress' recognition of the impact of various subcultures, as well. He shares an excellent (what I like to think of as) "theology of culture shock," pointing out that "the Christian who attempts to cross a cultural barrier out of love for others finds inevitably that it involves a painful dying to self" (p. 132). He offers constructive ways to analyze cultural change and diversity, all the while maintaining a balanced view regarding the tension between differences in language and culture. He effectively shows the long-term linguistic impact that is caused when whole cultures turn away from God. He explores the potential contribution missionary anthropologists can make to bringing about reconciliation. While pointing out that we are all at risk of being deceived by pride (whether as individuals or as cultures), he warns against despising the fruits of Western theology (particularly the Reformation) in a type of "reverse ethnocentrism" that could encourage false pride in Third World Christians.

Discourse (Chapters 20–23)

This part focuses on spoken and written discourse. Poythress notes the contradictions that often are left unresolved when one attempts to interpret meaning (distinguishing these contradictions from legitimate diversity) and contrasts that with the unity in God's meanings. He eloquently states what he perceives to be the goal of human communication, that it is "not autonomous, independent speech on the part of human beings, but speaking out of a mind in deep fellowship with God and empowered by the Spirit of God.... We aim to express God's meanings along with our own" (p. 167). In the meantime, however, he suggests that "the ideal of perfectly precise authorial intention is...a dangerous idea...since it could appear to give to man the kind of control that only God possesses" (p. 168). But we should still be aware that "paying attention to authors' intentions is an implication of biblical ethics" (p. 173), a principle that has unfortunately escaped the concern of many (even Christian) academics throughout history. This is particularly pertinent to how we deal with the Bible and with God as its author.

The three perspectives (particle, wave, and field) introduced earlier are applied to interpretation. So in the particle perspective, the *stability* of meaning is in focus. "God is stable...so all his utterances have stability of meaning. Human beings, created in the image of God, also produce utterances with stable meaning" (p. 178). In the wave perspective, the focus is on *dynamic* developments, and the intentions

behind utterances are under consideration. In the field perspective, the *relations* of utterances to a larger social context are in view.

Here he also spends some time interacting with ideas from both modernism and postmodernism, challenging us at times to be skeptical of the skeptics. He lays out some principles for biblical interpretation (such as letting Scripture interpret Scripture, not pressuring other believers to accept ideas not clearly supported by particular texts, etc.).

Stories (Chapters 24–29)

This section explores the use of stories in language. Having introduced *genres* in the Discourse section, he delves into the genre of storytelling, which we also find in the Bible. There are insiders' and outsiders' views in stories. There are the plot, roles, the concept of good vs. evil...and these categories are reflected in God's work and world, especially in the story of redemption. But outside the Bible we also encounter counterfeit stories of redemption. Poythress identifies specific examples: the Enlightenment myth, creation myths, evolutionary naturalism, Marxism, and postmodern contextualism. He probes the underlying assumptions of modern reinterpretations of redemptive stories (e.g. existentialism, multiculturalism). He reveals how our macrostories influence scholarship. "Historians with a substitute for God generally do not believe in this kind of relation, nor do they believe that theology shows the meaning of history. So they *systematically* and thoroughly distort the actual meaning" (p. 236). In response to all these views, he writes, "over against the counterfeits is the Christian view. The Christian view of transcendence says that God has the right to tell us about Jesus; and the Christian view of immanence says that God can make himself clear" (p. 234).

Smaller Packages in Language (Chapters 30–34)

This part gets down to some of the smaller components of language: sentences and words. The author links these to perspectives. Since "language as a whole derives from God...we are also invited to see how particular pieces within language owe their origin to God" (p. 256). While he goes into enough technical detail (especially at the phonetic and phonological level) to satisfy a linguist, he offers enough explanation for someone not familiar with the terminology to follow his reasoning. He also skillfully blends in theology, including a section focusing on the name of God (YHWH).

Poythress discusses the accessibility of truth at this level. Due to the influence of postmodernism, many question the adequacy of language. That is why he returns to this theme time and again throughout the book, each time from a different angle. Poythress applies this to the activity of Bible translation. While nuances in meaning may not be identical in all languages, all translations translate truth, making "the truth about the love of God accessible to people everywhere" (p. 253).

Poythress has taken great pains to support his view that the imprint of the Trinity is everywhere in language. On many points, I agreed (or was at least intrigued by where he was going). He goes on to argue, however, that due to archetype and ectype distinctions in language (and the possibility for multiple foci in language as seen in the existence of active *and* passive voice) a reflection of the Trinity is even built into this aspect of (English) grammar, and a little later he states, "the structure of clauses has its roots in the character of God" (p. 258). I wondered if he was starting to take his idea a bit too far; it began to feel forced at times. For example, the fact that the author could often find *three* corresponding relations in language which seemed to be bound together (e.g. *meaning*, *presence*, and *control* in language supposedly corresponding to God *omniscience* [Father], *omnipotence* [Son], and *omnipresence* [Spirit]) did not always convince me that God intended for this to be an inescapable revelation of his Triune nature in language. What if there happened to be four or five corresponding relations, and we happened to miss some upon first consideration? Would that then prove that God is a unity of more than three Persons? Of course not. The analogy would simply cease to be a valid one. I believe caution should be exercised in playing the "do you see what I see?" game in such a context.

Application (Chapters 35–36)

Part six concludes the main portion of the book, dealing with truth as perspective (chapter 35) and living in the truth (chapter 36). Here the author often speaks with almost creedal language as he attempts to “trace out stages in the display of truth” (p. 290). In light of the insights gained through this in-depth exploration of the intricacies of language, Poythress wonders with us how we are to view the Bible. And how do we view general revelation? We are reminded as we seek to live in the truth that meaning existed before humankind did. This should humble us. The importance of the idea of “control” in language is reiterated (God controls meaning). We are also challenged to go beyond merely studying the curiosities of language. God requires truthfulness and moral responsibility in our use of language. We may not use it as we please.

If human beings tried consistently to abandon moral standards with respect to language, no one could be trusted, and communication would be full of failures as well as treacheries. God makes the world of communication livable. But, short of completely reforming and purifying human beings as he will do in the consummation, he rules over a world that still contains lies and treacheries in human language use (p. 298).

The need for God to transform not only our hearts but our cultures and languages is apparent. We need “the Word” to rescue us in every sense!

Appendices (A–J)

The book ends with a generous section of ten appendices which offer interactions with other approaches to language than that which Poythress has taken. These include modernism, postmodernism, platonic ideas, structural linguistics, translation theory, symbolic logic, deconstruction, and more. These make the book an excellent reference tool.

Final Evaluation

While reading this book, I could sense the author’s passion. He succeeds in clearly portraying the beauty of language. This is, for the most part, not dry academic reading; at the same time, it is deep and thorough enough to be above the level of popular theological/inspirational works. I appreciated certain recurring themes throughout (especially those of unity vs. diversity, and the interaction between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility in language). Poythress shows a humility that is rare in academia as he strives for love to prevail even in this realm. He reminds us that, due to common grace, we can still gain valuable insights from people who are “wrong.” All the while, he portrays a strong commitment to orthodox Christianity.

The only recurring concept I especially considered to be questionable was that reflected in his insistence (if I have understood him correctly) that God pre-ordained the exact sounds and meanings of each individual word in every language. While God certainly could have done that, I wasn’t sure how much it mattered. (I wondered if Poythress would consider it heretical to believe that God simply put the principles and possibilities for language in place and allowed each distinct linguistic group to creatively develop their own language over time.) Overall, however, he was very articulate and, given the breadth of topics covered, relatively concise. I would be interested to see whether this study will earn a place as a course textbook in any context.