

Language of Missions: Art Rooted in the Trinitarian Language of God

Roger W. Lowther

Global Missiology. vol. 3, no. 16 (April 2019)

www.globalmissiology.org

Abstract

Musicians, visual artists, dancers, drama students, photographers, film students, and other artists are entering the mission field at a record pace, fundamentally changing the way we do missions. How so? What makes the arts so effective at communicating truths about God and the gospel? How do the arts communicate differently than plain words? The languages of the arts, like all languages, are rooted in the language of the Triune God. They reveal the nature of God, speak of his purposes, and assure us of his presence. God speaks through the arts of every language, tribe, and nation to help us know him and worship him through every culture of the world.

Key Words: Art, Mission, Trinity, Language, Japan

Introduction

“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ‘Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message’” (Jeremiah 18:1-2). As a missionary artist, I am fascinated by this way that God communicates with Israel. Why did God tell Jeremiah to go the *potter’s* house? Why did God choose to communicate through *art*? Why did God not just use plain words?

Scripture, of course, overflows with examples of God creatively getting his message across. Consider other instances, such as when Jeremiah binds himself in a yoke (Jeremiah 27:2), Isaiah ambles around town naked with “buttocks bared” (Isaiah 20), and Ezekiel lies on his side for 390 days eating nothing but bread baked with (what symbolized) human excrement (Ezekiel 4:10). Look at the largely overly meticulous details given to Moses for the ark of the covenant and tent of meeting, and to David for the building of the temple. Consider even Jesus’ abundant use of parables and metaphors rooted in the natural world—good shepherd, bread of life, light of the world. Why *did* God often speak through such creative means and works of art?

The language God uses with humanity encompasses more than just verbal or written words, revealing profound implications for our understanding of God and his creation. This article explores some of these implications, first by showing how all language, including the language of the arts, is rooted in the Trinitarian language of God. It then investigates the artistic, creative, and behavioral expressions that unavoidably communicate God’s character and existence. The paper then ends by exploring how this reflection of Trinitarian language is especially well-suited for communicating God’s character and presence in cross-cultural settings. These topics are built on a biblical-theological foundation for language.

Rooted in the Language of the Triune God

For the Christian, any discussion about language should begin with the Trinity (Van Til 2003:20, Lausanne 2004). God is a linguistic community of three persons, who have been communicating with each other through love and glory for all eternity (John 16:13-15, 17). God the Father (the Speaker), God the Son (the Word), and God the Holy Spirit (the Breath) relate to each other linguistically. Theologian Douglas Kelly describes it this way:

The one eternal LORD exists as a communion of holy love within Himself, and this means personal existence; that is, the inter-communion of three equally divine and holy Persons. For God to be is to be in relationship with Himself...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 (Kelly 2008:447, 487).

Because language is far deeper than any human invention, the study of language should not begin with the study of humanity. Language is central to the inner life of the Trinity. God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end of all human communication. “All coherent and effective human behavior is rooted not in social patterns or evolutionary development, but in the self-contained ontological Trinity, in whose image we are made” (Hibbs 2016:300). Therefore, “language does not have as its sole purpose human-human communication, or even divine-human communication but also divine-divine communication” (Poythress 2009:18).

Language is intrinsic to God (*ad intra*) in the “self-contained ontological Trinity,” but it is also extrinsic to God (*ad extra*) in everything he has made. All created things were made through the act of God “opening his holy lips” (Calvin 2014). All things were created and all things hold together through the Word of God.

For in [Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17).

As Pierce Taylor Hibbs describes it, “We live in a worded world, spoken into being by the self-communing God, sustained and governed by the Father’s divine Word and the power of the Spirit, everywhere revealing the Triune God” (Hibbs 2018:131). There is nothing in all of creation that does not communicate something about the Trinitarian God, because everything in creation reflects the God who spoke it into being. For this reason, we can say that God communicates and has made himself known through the works of his speech.

What may be known about God is plain to [people], because God has made it plain to them (Romans 1:19).

In creation, “God has written his own autobiography” (Sayers 1987:87), clearly revealing that he, as the Trinitarian God, has created the world in divine community.

By the word (God the Son) of the LORD (God the Father) the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath (God the Holy Spirit) of his mouth (Psalm 33:6).

These divine origins, then, are the foundation for all human language. The Trinity is reflected in our world and reverberates in our speech. We are made in the *imago Dei*, and our language is a reflection (dim as it might be) of this Trinitarian language.

Even so, language is a lot more than the words people speak! In order to understand how artists can communicate through music or painting or dance, we need to come to a broader understanding of language in non-verbal human behavior as it relates to the non-verbal communication of God.

A Wholistic Definition of Language

Acquiring another language as an adult is hard! Anyone who lives cross-culturally can tell you so. Face, hands, body language (notice the word ‘language’ used here) are just as important, and sometimes more so, than verbal conversation. Non-verbal gestures communicate whether we intend them to or not, sometimes leading to humorous or disastrous results.

Kenneth L. Pike, former president of the language-focused mission organization SIL International, defined language this way:

Language is a phase of human activity which must not be treated in essence as structurally divorced from the structure of nonverbal human activity. The activity of man constitutes a structural whole, in such a way that it cannot be subdivided into neat ‘parts’ or ‘levels’ or ‘compartments’ with language in a behavioral compartment insulated in character, content, and organization from other behavior. Verbal and nonverbal activity is a unified whole, and theory and methodology should be organized or created to treat it as such...Just as the verbal replies of a speaker help one determine meanings of elements of communication, so the nonverbal ones do likewise. To attempt to analyze or describe language without reference to its function in eliciting responses—verbal and nonverbal—is to ignore one of the crucial kinds of evidence (Pike 1967:26, 39-40).

Pike spent his life teaching the nature of language, especially in the context of foreign missions. He preferred to call language a “behavior” of communication rather than a method, because language is “not merely a set of unrelated sounds, clauses, rules, and meanings; it is a total coherent system of these integrating with each other, and with behavior, context, universe of discourse, and observer perspectives” (Pike 1982:44). A wholistic definition of language goes beyond words, phrases, and sentences to give a more accurate picture of how humans actually interact with one another.

This broader view of language which includes non-verbal and verbal communication fits with a biblical understanding of how God speaks to us. God communicates non-verbally through the things he has made.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have *no speech*, they use *no words*; *no sound* is heard from them. *Yet their voice goes out* into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world (Psalm 19:1-4).

God holds all of creation together by speaking with his powerful word (Hebrews 1:3; Psalm 147:15-18). The trees sing. The stones cry out. Scripture asserts that “what may be known about God is plain to [human beings], because God has made it plain to them” (Romans 1:19). Or as

Augustine put it in his *Confessions*, “The sky and the earth too, and everything in them—all these things around me are telling me that I should love you; and since they never cease to proclaim this to everyone, those who do not hear are left without excuse” (Augustine 2002:241).

All of creation cannot help but reveal something of the God who spoke it into being; that revelatory character is woven with his fingers into the very fabric of creation (Psalm 8:3). Sky and earth and everything in them tell something of God’s character because “language is primarily a means of revelation,” wrote the late Eugene Peterson (Peterson 2008:10). God, whom we cannot see, shows himself to us everywhere through the works of his speech. “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” (Edwards 2011:237).

Whichever way we turn our eyes, there is no part of the world, however small, in which at least some spark of God’s glory does not shine. In particular, we cannot gaze upon this beautiful masterpiece of the world, in all its length and breadth, without being completely dazzled, as it were, by an endless flood of light. Accordingly, in Hebrews, the apostle aptly calls the world the mirror of things invisible, because the structure of the world serves as a mirror in which we behold God, who otherwise cannot be seen (Hebrews 11:3) (Calvin 2014:10).

Communicative Role of Art

The revelational nature of God’s creation is one key to the role of the arts in foreign missions. God expresses his character not only through everything he has made, but through everything people have made too, because humans are not autonomous. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Through common grace, human beings cannot exist apart from God in this world. All people are made and sustained by the word of God. All of our actions are designed to glorify God. Humanity’s rebellious sin, however, muddles the message of glorifying God that we were designed to give. Consider these words by the apostle Paul: “They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him” (Titus 1:16), as well as the words by the apostle James: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22). Whether we realize it or not, all of our creaturely behaviors “speak” about God. Both verbal and non-verbal behaviors communicate. Everything we do, one way or another, communicates covenantal submission to God or sinful rebellion against him (Hibbs 2016:158).

*Nihonga*¹ artist Makoto Fujimura points out that the Greek words translated “do what it says” literally mean be ‘poets’ of the word. He puts it this way:

Being a doer means bringing action into belief, but it’s a little bit different when you have to be a poet of the word. Yes, ‘do,’ but also craft into a new creation. Merge who you are in Christ as a new creation into what God is creating through us, which is the broader reality of the new creation. Become a poet by doing the word of God (Fujimura 2018).

¹ *Nihonga* is a tradition Japanese painting technique that works with ground minerals, shells, coral, semi-precious stones, and precious metals on handmade paper using a hide glue solution. Gradations of color are determined by how finely the minerals are crushed.

We are God's *poem* (Ephesians 2:10) created in the Word to be God's *poet* of the word. Everything we are, do, and make is a means of communicating God's word, because verbal *and* non-verbal behavior together communicate.

When the Trinity spoke humanity into being with the words, "Let *us* make man in *our* image," he designed men and women as social creatures in the image of God. Therefore, everything humans say and do either builds or destroys community with God and with one another, a characteristic especially pronounced in the language of the arts. Consider how when artists create or when humans experience something beautiful, they have an overwhelming desire to share it with others. As I heard one film director say, "Art is about turning to the person next to you and saying, 'You have to see this!' Art builds community." Your experience of joy is incomplete unless it is experienced together. The desire of artists for people to share their work and hear its message, and through it to know them, seems to be stronger than in other professions. Dentists and doctors usually do not expect patients to initiate friendships with them. In fact, they may be relieved not to mix personal and professional relationships. However, I have never met an artist who was relieved you did not go to his or her concert, gallery exhibition, or performance. Their art is fundamental to their relationships with people and the world. It is their language, an important part of their communication. The communal aspect of creating and sharing reflects the Trinitarian character of the arts, a working out of the Trinitarian love and joy that inevitably points back toward God and relationship with him. I can see the importance of the audience to my own work as a musician, for it is the natural working out of the communicative nature of language rooted in the Trinity. God the Spirit is the Hearer (John 16:13) of the Word (God the Son) from the Speaker (God the Father).

It is interesting to note that the Japanese word 造る ("to make, to build") actually implies communication or proclamation. This same character is fundamental to others words such as 構造 "to construct," 製造 "to manufacture," 改造 "to rebuild," 木造 "to make from wood," and more. The word 造る consists of two components. The main part on the right 告 means "tell" and can be found in words like 報告 "report, inform," 警告 "warn, advise," and 広告 "advertisement" (literally "tell broadly"). The radical on the left 辶 means "road, advance, proceed" and implies movement. Together, then, the word "to make" literally means to say through movement, or in the *economic* work of the Trinity, God's word goes out into the world to make and accomplish something.²

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that *goes out* from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:10-11).

We see here, even in the roots of the Japanese language, that making is rooted in the Trinitarian language of God.

Consider how the Trinity communicates through the art of *urushi*, the Japanese craft of lacquerware. The artisan cuts the *urushi* tree and sap oozes out. This sap, which naturally coats the wound with a hard protective layer, is collected, mixed with minerals to change its color,

² The *economic* Trinity, the Trinitarian character of God expressed in activity toward the world in creation, providence, redemption, and consummation, is grounded in the *ontological* Trinity, the Trinitarian character of God apart from creation. God's Word "goes out" as part of his *economic* work rooted in the *ontological* Trinity.

painted onto a wooden bowl or utensil, and allowed to dry. The artist repeats this process 10, 20, 30 or more times to cover the bowl with thicker and thicker layers. The whole process consumes enormous amounts of time, taking months to give the bowl time to dry between each and every layer. In the final layer, gold, shell, or other items can be pressed into the ‘wet’ *urushi* for decoration.

The *urushi* artist literally dramatizes the story of Christ’s sacrifice in every single bowl made. First, the artisan cuts stripes into the tree—reminders of the words of Isaiah when he says, “with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). Then the healing sap pours out to be used to cover and protect many bowls. Recall the words of Jesus when he says, “This is my blood...poured out for many” (Matthew 26:28). And then these wooden bowls, so weak, fragile, and easily mildewed in the humid Japanese climate, suddenly can withstand any kind of moisture, temperature, or damage because of the protection of the tree. The words of Paul come to mind: “I boast in my weakness, that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

God the Father continually paints us with layer after layer of his grace through God the Holy Spirit so that God the Son’s righteousness may cover us, shelter us, and protect us. The blood of the Lamb enters our wounds and suffering, transforming our weakness into strength and ugly sin into beauty. The sap of the cross transforms us more and more into the likeness of Christ with every successive layer. The Father, Son, and Spirit harmoniously work together to redeem his people.

Fujimura calls this gracious process the “theology of making,” arising from an understanding of the Trinity communicating through what we make and do. Great pieces of art, like centuries-old *urushi* bowls or, say, handmade *raku* pottery,³ point beyond themselves and the people who made them to something sublime and transcendent. These works of art tell a hidden story. The American conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein famously spoke and wrote about this power of art. In the manner of a Socratic dialectic, Leonard Bernstein (L.B.) carries on a conversation with an unnamed lyric poet (L.P.) about the music of Beethoven:

L.B. Our boy [Beethoven] has the real goods, the stuff from Heaven, the power to make you feel at the finish: *Something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down.*

L.P. (Quietly): But that is almost a definition of God.

L.B. I meant it to be (Bernstein 2004:29).

Bernstein affirmed the power of great art to make us feel like everything is right with the universe, that there is purpose. There is order. Everything will be okay because there is “something we can trust, that will never let us down.” I remember well in my humanities classes at The Juilliard School when we talked about nihilism and meaningless in life. One student said, “This may or may not be true for other people, but at least *we* have meaning...because we have music.” No matter what people believe, they feel something or someone communicating behind and beyond the art. Art communicates directly and existentially to the heart that some truth transcends our human reason and indeed may even challenge our understanding of it.

³ Traditional Japanese pottery, treasured for its rustic simplicity, used by the 16th-century tea master Sen no Rikyū.

Conclusion

Let's return to the book of Jeremiah. Why *did* God tell Jeremiah to go to the potter's house? Why did God communicate in *this* way? God spoke through the art of pottery to give a wholistic message to his gospel message,⁴ thereby also showing he is Lord over all of creation. We are the clay, and he is the potter; we are all the work of his hand (Isaiah 64:8). Artists can boldly make for the glory of God because our 'language of making' is rooted in the Trinitarian language of God. And ultimately, God uses all our languages for the purpose of glory in heaven.

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (Revelation 7:9, 11-12).

A great multitude from *every* language, including the language of the arts, glorify Christ in heaven.

Until that time, God will continue to speak through missionary artists as they spread the gospel across the face of this planet. What new insights and fresh perspectives of the gospel will be gained? What new ways will we find to worship and praise God? Only in heaven itself will we be able to fully answer this question and worship through them with all of creation for the eternal praise and glory of God.

*All creatures of our God and King,
Lift up your voice and with us sing,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thou burning sun with golden beam,
Thou silver moon with softer gleam!
O praise Him! O praise Him!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

⁴ The gospel message is visualized by how the artist took a "marred" pot, which was not shaping up (literally) to the creator's intent, and "formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him" (Jeremiah 18:4). God directed Jeremiah to this image so that he and Israel (and subsequent hearers and readers, including us today) could see what the redemptive work of God looks like. Redemption looks like clay in the hands of the potter (v. 5) being re-created into exactly what the creator intends.

References

- Augustine (2002). *The Confessions*. Trans. by Maria Boulding, O. S. B. New York: New City Press.
- Bernstein, Leonard (2004). *The Joy of Music*. New Jersey: Amadeus Press.
- Calvin, John (2014). *Institutes of the Christian Religion: A New Translation of the 1541 Edition*. Trans. by Robert White. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth.
- Edwards, Jonathan (2011). “The ‘Miscellanies’: Number 1340,” in *Christian Apologetics Past and Present*, vol. 2, *From 1500*, ed. William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
- Fujimura, Makoto (2018). “The Art of the Gospels,” *Museum of the Bible*, available online at <https://youtu.be/evSMPyIRFis> (accessed April 24, 2019).
- Hibbs, Pierce Taylor (2016). “Closing the Gaps: Perichoresis and the Nature of Language” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 78, no. 2: 299-322.
- Hibbs, Pierce Taylor (2018). *The Speaking Trinity and His Worded World*. Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock.
- Kelly, Douglas (2008). *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.
- Lausanne Movement (2004). “Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God’s Creational Intention (LOP 46),” Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 46, available online at <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/redeeming-arts-restoration-arts-gods-creational-intention-lop-46> (accessed April 24, 2019).
- Peterson, Eugene (2008). *Tell It Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Pike, Kenneth L. (1967). *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. The Hague: Mouton.
- Pike, Kenneth L. (1982). *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Poythress, Vern S. (2009). *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
- Sayers, Dorothy (1987). *The Mind of the Maker*. New York: HarperOne.
- Van Til, Cornelius (2003). *Christian Apologetics*. 2nd ed. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed.