THE WORDS OF THE SPEAKER:
HOW THREE TRIADS ILLUMINE THE AUTHORITY OF THE PREACHED WORD

By

J. D. HERR

B.S., Philadelphia Biblical University, 2008

A THESIS

Submitted to the faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
Theological Studies
at Reformed Theological Seminary

Charlotte, North Carolina
February 2019
Accepted:

_______________________________________________________
First Reader, Dr. James Anderson

_______________________________________________________
Second Reader
According to J. L. Austin’s important work, *How to Do Things With Words*, the philosophic and linguistic assumption for centuries has been that saying something “is always and simply to state something.”¹ For many people today, speech is simply the description of a place or event. It is either true or false, because it either describes an item or event well, or it does not. It either re-states propositional truth or it does not. Austin’s program was to regain an understanding and awareness of the force of speech—what is done in saying something—and came to be known as speech act theory.

Similarly, in the discipline of theology, and in the life of the Church, many people tend to think of preaching as the passing of some “truth” from the divine mind to the human mind, or from the preacher’s mind to the hearer’s mind. While it is that, in a very real and meaningful way, in this paper I seek to explore whether there is more. As incarnate creatures, God has made humans to consist of spiritual and physical aspects. If we focus wholly on the “mental truth transfer” aspect of speech, especially in the case of preaching, how does this leave the Church equipped to bridge the divide between the mental information and what they are to do in their bodies?

By interacting with and interfacing the triadic framework of speech act theory with the triadic frameworks of Dorothy Sayers and John Frame, I seek to understand preaching in

---

a more biblically-holistic way. I introduce these problems further in chapter 1, interact with these frameworks in chapter 2, assess them in light of Scripture and church history in chapter 3, and apply them to the preaching of the Church in chapter 4. Thus, I will argue that God’s covenant-making speech is more than information, but effects a real relational change, and the same covenant-making speech is at work in the Church today. By faithfully preaching the Word of God, ministers are continually setting God’s people apart, and calling them to respond in faith.
Dedicated to John Frame, whose writings always seemed to find their way into the middle of my theological development, and whose heart for the glory of God is an enduring example.

With grateful thanks to Kevin Vanhoozer and Kit Barker for their gracious interaction, encouragement, and insight.
CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES...........................................................................................................viii

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION...........................................................................................................1
   Literature Review........................................................................................................4

2. NORM, AUTHORITY, & IDEA ................................................................................6
   The Problem of Meaning in Speech ...........................................................................6
   Speech Act Theory as an Answer ..............................................................................13
   Overlapping Frameworks .........................................................................................14
   Christian Applications of Speech Act Theory ..........................................................40
   Retrospective Summary and Prospective Subsequence .........................................51

3. SITUATION, CONTROL, & ENERGY .....................................................................52
   Performative Speech in the Scriptures ....................................................................52
   Performative Speech in Church History .................................................................78

4. EXISTENCE, PRESENCE, & POWER .................................................................92
   Ecclesiastical Declarative Authority: Misplaced? ...................................................92
   Ecclesiastical Declarative Authority: Reclaimed .....................................................98
   Suggestions for Further Ecclesiastical Application ..............................................102

5. CONCLUSION..........................................................................................................106
FIGURES

Figure

1. Frame’s Perspective Triangle .................................................................37
2. Frame’s “Lordship Attributes” Added to the Triangle .............................37
3. My Triangular, Triadic Synthesis .............................................................39
4. Philosophical Triad of “God, Self, & World” on my Triangle .................40
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I doubt whether we are sufficiently attentive to the importance of our words. That is why I have chosen as a chief interest of this paper a relatively simple-sounding yet important theory, that which is known as “speech act theory.” To the keen-eyed reader, the preceding pair of sentences will be seen as direct riffs on the opening pair of sentences in C.S. Lewis’s important work, *The Abolition of Man*.\(^1\) Though the ostensible starting point of Lewis’s discussion is “elementary text books,” his ensuing discussion contains much overlap with the topic at hand. Namely, the question of what, if anything, is the force of the spoken word. And so in setting up my own goals, I will begin by discussing some of Lewis’s.

The beginning of *The Abolition of Man* finds Lewis critiquing a book which he found problematic. It was a real book, but for the purpose of saving their reputation, Lewis concealed the names of the authors and of the book itself, by giving them false names. “Gaius” and “Titius” he named the authors, and “*The Green Book*” he fictionally dubbed their real book. In their book, Gaius and Titius describe the responses of two tourists visiting a waterfall. One calls the sight “sublime,” while the other calls it “pretty.” It might seem to us, the authors say, that the first tourist is describing the waterfall, but not so. Rather, they say, though the sentence includes a “predicate of value” (sublimity), the first tourist is

---

actually simply expressing the feelings she has at the moment. According to Gaius and Titius, “This confusion is continually present in language as we use it. We appear to be saying something very important about something: and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings.” Thus, the implication is that statements about the value of something are really statements about the speaker’s emotions, and as such they are not ultimately meaningful. This reduces speech to description of one’s feelings, which removes most of the weight and importance from them, leaving discourse as just so many “feelings” bumping into one another.

Interestingly, however, Lewis is not concerned about whether this was the realized intention of Gaius and Titius. Rather he is most concerned with “the effect their book will certainly have on the schoolboy’s mind.” Stated otherwise, for my purposes, the words of Gaius and Titius will do something, and specifically, will do something in the minds of their readers. This view that our words are simply “descriptions” or “statements” about our inner emotions or thoughts—which I will call the “Green Book Problem”—is a central problem when it is presupposed by educators. Education, Lewis says, is not just replacing wrong ideas with right ideas (“cutting down jungles”), it is training and beautifying and growing the whole person (“irrigating deserts”). Indeed, “the right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments.” And for Lewis, “sentiments” are more than just “ideas” and “information.” Instead, a just sentiment is the properly-trained emotion, which holds the

---

2 Lewis, Abolition, 694. I have added the italics here, to highlight the pertinence of this section for broader thoughts about language.

3 Ibid., 695.

4 Ibid., 699.
intellect and the body (or “animal organism”) together. The whole person (head, heart, and hands) must be trained in virtue, not just filled with cognitive information.

According to J. L. Austin’s important work, *How to Do Things With Words*, the philosophic and linguistic assumption for centuries has been that saying something is always “to state something.”5 Speech, for many, is simply the description of a place or event. It is either true or false, because it either describes an item or event well, or it does not. It either re-states propositional truth or it does not. So-called “speech act theory,” coming from Austin’s work, has sought to regain the force of speech, rather than its mere meaning (its sense and reference). Stated otherwise, Austin saw a form of the “Green Book Problem,” and sought to remedy it.

Is it possible that the same problem may be found in the Church today? Do we place an over-emphasis on the mental, propositional, information when it comes to the preached word, and de-emphasize the training of hearts and the call to faithful response?6 Perhaps not in theory, and maybe on paper the Church has the right formulations of the proper relationship between statements of truth and faithful response. But in this study, I will suggest that whether this is an epidemic in the Church, or merely a small ailment—whether it affects all churches greatly, all churches a little, some churches greatly, or some churches a little—recovering a more thorough-going and biblical conception of the force of words will encourage ministers in their preaching and congregations in their hearing.


6 No doubt, there is a certain force in speaking propositional information. And of course, one cannot perform a speech act with meaningless (propositionless) words. But the question remains one of emphasis.
Literature Review

To this end, I begin on the basis of three major categories, each which has its own special conceptual “triad.” The first is the category of speech act theory, specifically focusing on the work of J. L. Austin and John R. Searle. Their (secular) work engages the philosophy of language, and specifically the acts performed in speaking, as opposed to the merely descriptive idea of language. The second is the literary work of Dorothy Sayers, centered on her intriguing work, *The Mind of the Maker.* Her suggestion is that the Christian creeds can call God the “Maker,” and that can make sense to us because we have similar experiences in “making” things ourselves, when we imitate God as sub-makers or sub-creators (lesser creators, or under-creators). Third is the triperspectivalism of John M. Frame, centered on two particular works: *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* and *The Doctrine of God.* In Frame’s work, not only is God Triune, but his Lordship over his creation may be described as a triad. Thus also, our greater understanding of the world and of anything that can be known, can be assessed by the harmonization of a triad of perspectives.

The next chapter will use the work of Rolf Rendtorff in *The Covenant Formula* as the basis for an introductory foray into the world of God’s covenant-making speech.

Rendtorff’s is an inductive study of the various Old Testament appearances of God’s

---


statement of his intention to be God to his people, and his desire that they be a people to him, and he helpfully catalogs instances of these statements, as well as assessing their import for the broader flow of covenantal redemptive history throughout the Old Testament. I will use this as grounds for some in-depth study of God’s words in Exodus 6:7 in particular.

Using the common grace principles of speech act theory, and relating Austin’s triad to those triads of Sayers and Frame, this paper will explore the performative speech of God’s covenant making with his people, and argue that when God utters the Covenant Formula, it is not just a description of fact, but a speech act which sets a people apart, and calls them to respond in faith. Christ’s Church, and ministers in particular, are similarly expected to act in speech as “sub-covenanters” (sub-creators) who speak on behalf of God, and thus Christian ministers, by faithfully preaching the Word of God, are continually setting God’s people apart, and calling them to respond in faith.
CHAPTER 2
NORM, AUTHORITY, & IDEA

The Problem of Meaning in Speech

“What do you mean by that?” asks the curious adolescent, suspicious that his friend who had just called him a “real winner” may have had ulterior motives. Did his friend mean that the boy is someone who successfully defeats opponents, odds, and deadlines? Or, more subtly, did he employ sarcasm to mean just the opposite? To complicate things, we might also ask, “What do you mean by ‘What do you mean by that?’” Does the boy mean to suggest that he really has no idea what these words mean? Does he express a sort of tabula rasa, cheerful, ignorance? Or does he mean that he is suspicious and wants his friend to confess that he was being snide? For all human beings engaged in the interplay of communication—especially that communication with words—the meaning of “meaning” is an important, but also exceedingly difficult, question to answer. This difficulty is compounded by variegated levels of speech such as “more important” versus “less important” speech (the meaning of a sacred text versus the meaning of an opinion column, for instance), or “individual word meaning” versus “full passage meaning” (discussing the meaning of the word “wise” versus discussing the meaning of the phrase “he is wise,” and so forth). In this section, I want to briefly outline

It should be noted that communication is not, properly speaking, verbal speech. Verbal speaking is communication, but communication is a much more complex web of non-verbal cues such as body language and intonation, or even other symbols and referents. Throughout this paper, however, it will be assumed that verbal or written words are the sole focus.
the problem of meaning as it relates to biblical interpretation: finding the “meaning” of a text of Scripture.

In his book, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Milton S. Terry quotes the following sentiment from another author: “Language . . . has, in fact, no existence save in the minds and mouths of those who use it; it is made up of separate articulated signs of thought, each of which is attached by a mental association to the idea it represents, is uttered by voluntary effort, and has its value and currency only by the agreement of speakers and hearers.”

For Terry, this means that understanding someone’s speech requires, first of all, knowledge of the individual word meanings. This is valid, and the description of words as “separate articulated signs of thought” which live in a world of “agreement of speakers and hearers” is important as we seek to understand the connection to between concept and reality. However, in this statement, we ought to note that for Terry, speech takes a visceral thought or “idea” of a mind and describes it by “articulated signs of thought,” with the goal that the hearer may also gain the same visceral thought in his own mind. In this telling, communication is traffic, mainly, in brain synapse data, and meaning seems to be limited to the content or referent of whatever “thought” has been transmitted.

Similarly, when it comes to biblical interpretation itself, there are those formulations which John Frame calls “objectivist.” Princeton theologian Charles Hodge, identified by


3 Of course, I do not mean that this communication is traffic in only brain synapse data. However, the focus is on ideas and thoughts which are immaterial, and are passed from one mind—by the agency of the brain (and other faculties)—to another mind, with less focus on the effects of the words on the whole person. “Meaning” has its locus in the “mind,” in this conception.

Frame as a representative of such an approach, says “revelation is the supernatural objective presentation or communication of truth to the mind.”\(^5\) It is the transfer of noetic data (a “fact”) from one knowledge receptacle to another. Theology then, “is the exhibition of the facts of Scripture in their proper order and relation, with the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole.”\(^6\) In this way of thinking, a “fact” has its own reality and existence, “totally devoid of any interpretation.”\(^7\) Frame interacts with the preceding passage, saying that Hodge “wanted theology to describe the truth—what is the case apart from our feelings—the ‘objective’ truth. He wanted to set forth the facts as they are.”\(^8\) For Hodge and for others who may be considered “objectivists,” the nature of “meaning” is often located in the propositional content comprehended in the mind, and communicated by words. Similarly, Carl F.H. Henry helpfully explains other forms of divine revelation such as “anthropological revelation” and “redemptive revelation,” both under the category of “general revelation,” yet still describes the revelation in Scripture as something which can publish “the content of general revelation.”\(^9\) For Henry, Scripture includes “content,” or we could say, static information. He continues that “the whole canon of Scripture . . . objectively communicates in propositional-verbal form the content and meaning of all God’s revelation.”\(^10\) Likewise for Clark Pinnock, who rightly wishes to reject

---


\(^6\) Ibid., 19.

\(^7\) Frame, *Knowledge of God*, 71.

\(^8\) Ibid., 77-78.


\(^10\) Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 87.
both liberalism and neoorthodoxy, Scriptural revelation must necessarily be something which
is “enshrined in written records and is essentially propositional in nature.”

Knowing the 
“meaning of Scripture” then, for these writers, seems to mean the mind’s apprehension of
objective, propositional, bits of information.

To complicate matters further, this “objectivism” is often found at the word level as well. According to Louis Berkhof, one of the central principles of biblical interpretation is
that “a word can have but one fixed meaning in the connection in which it occurs.”

However, as most people understand, the meanings (i.e., definitions) of words change and
morph over time. Terry describes the changes in meaning of the Greek word “ἐκκλησία,” first
meaning an “assembly of the citizens of a Greek community,” but then by its inclusion in the
Septuagint, “the congregation of the people of Israel.” But of course, further, “a new idea is
added when our Lord says, ‘I will build my Church.’” Terry also recognizes shades of
meaning, and even “deeper meanings” in biblical words, beyond their surface meaning, as
well as differences of usage over time. He asks, “How few of those who daily use the word
sincere are aware that it was originally applied to pure honey, from which all wax was

---


12 Though interested in a different larger subject, Silva interacts with the preceding two quotations,
saying that these authors were “influenced by the Old Princeton conservative theologians,” which
would of course include Charles Hodge. See Thiago Machado Silva, “Scripture as Revelation in
direct=true&db=rlh&AN=127915767&site=ehost-live.


14 Terry, Hermeneutics, 176.

15 Ibid., 177.
Indeed, as Peter Leithart intimates, “Once upon a time, *chip* had no association with *computer,* and neither did *terminal* (which, as a noun, denoted airports and, as an adjective, described illnesses). Now they do.” Given these multifarious “meanings” of individual words—to say nothing of puns, plays on words, secondary references, and “deeper meanings” *a la* Terry—it becomes important to attend to what might be called the *usus loquendi,* or the way a particular author or epochal society uses a particular word. Taking these two assumptions together, the work of the interpretation of biblical “meaning” becomes very challenging: words have many definitions, shades of meaning, and historical meanings, but only one solitary meaning in a given context. How is one to find it? When one feels the weight of this task, it may come as less of a surprise that some are attracted to the Roman Church, which sees the Bible as “obscure” and “liable to be misunderstood.” How can the common Christian understand the meaning of the Scriptures?

To be very clear at this juncture, none of what I have surveyed thus far is wrong, *per se.* These same men espouse the encouraging doctrine of the “perspicuity of Scripture,” the belief that the Scriptures are sufficiently clear so that what is necessary to be believed can be understood. In other words, no one who holds to these formulations would say, in practice, that the Scriptures may not be reasonably understood. Frame even believes that if he could interact with Hodge today, Hodge would accept his arguments against a rigid

---

16 Ibid., 181.
17 Peter Leithart, *Deep Exegesis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 83.
“objectivism.” Further, it is not incorrect to speak of the “propositional truth” of Scripture, or the objective content of thoughts which may be transmitted via “articulated signs”; something we will encounter specifically in St. Augustine’s writings below. Nevertheless, the question I wish to raise is whether this is all there is to “meaning.” Are the difficulties of grasping the “meaning” of a text exacerbated by an undue focus on this one perspective? To put his answer succinctly, Frame says that “to ask for the meaning of an expression is to ask for an application.”21 If we ask, “What does that mean?” it means that we do not know how to use a statement properly. Frame laments that “over and over, preachers (and others) try to proclaim ‘meaning’ of the text and then its ‘application’—the first part is ‘what it means,’ the second ‘what it means to us.’ Sometimes we are told that we must understand ‘what it means’ before we can understand ‘how it applies.’”22 There must not be, he says, any dissociation of a text’s meaning from its application. To know one is to know the other, and vice versa.23

Some theologians have made attempts to describe a more balanced approach to interpretation, which seek to maintain the connection between the aspects of inductive and deductive scholarship and a text’s significance in the life of the Church. Grant R. Osborne suggests a “hermeneutic spiral” which moves “from text to context, from its original meaning

20 Frame, Knowledge of God, 80.


22 Frame, Knowledge of God, 82.

23 This does not rule out an “original meaning” which might be different from a “contemporary meaning.” If the two are different, it is not because the “propositional” information has changed (God’s word does not change; Num. 23:19), but that the application of it looks different. But this is part of its meaning, too.
to its contextualization for the church today.”

Along the lines of what we have already seen, Osborne notes that there

is no inherent meaning in a word. . . . [D]ictionaries give us the impression that words carry abstract content by their very nature. Yet in reality words are arbitrary symbols that have meaning only in a context.

However, because of this, he says something which the “objectivists” may not be comfortable saying: that we may distinguish “between the author’s intended meaning, which is singular in essence, and what the text ‘means’ for each of us, which is multiple.” While this may seem on the surface to go against the common idea that the “true and full sense of Scripture . . . is not manifold, but one,” this begins to depict for us the multi-leveled nature of interpretation of “meaning.” If we consign the meaning of “meaning” to the merely rational, propositional content contained in the mind, we separate the “meaning” of Scripture from its outworking in the real world. But as Osborne argues, the “actual purpose of Scripture is not explanation but exposition, not description but proclamation.” The meaning of Scripture is not to transmit “information” but, as Frame would have it, it is “the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life.” With this in mind, Frame

---


25 Ibid., 75.

26 Ibid. Emphasis added.


argues, “the meaning of a text is any use to which it may legitimately be put,” which means “that in one sense the meaning of any text is indefinite.”

The broader questions of hermeneutics and interpretation are beyond the scope of this paper. But the purpose of this section has been to show, in cursory form, the tensions and confusions that can arise when we speak of “meaning.” These tensions and differences in definitions can lead to misunderstandings and disagreements which may serve to hobble the confidence of Christian ministers and stunt the spiritual growth of the Church.

Speech Act Theory as an Answer

What is the best way to move forward? How may we better understand our words, and the words of God, in a way which does not take away from the recognition of propositional truth and the importance of statements of objective facts of knowledge, but also maintains and encourages the deduction of real-world meaning in the text of Scripture? Craig Bartholomew gives us a suggestion:

Speech-act theory is helpful in alerting us to the many different intentions of the biblical texts. Their illocutionary force often cannot be reduced to telling the truth in a propositional form. Instruction in the sense of conveying truth is one illocutionary force that needs to be seen in the context of many other such forces, such as warning, opening a dialogue, encouraging, rendering a world, inviting, and so forth. The rich diversity of these illocutionary forces need to be fully in play in order for us to hear Scripture address us with power.  

30 Frame, Knowledge of God, 198.

Though speech act theory is not in itself a united philosophy of language, nor can we expect it to resolve all of our questions of biblical interpretation, it provides some helpful insights which expand our perspectives, and give us terminology with which to think through our interpretation and, more importantly, our proclamation.

### Overlapping Frameworks

#### The Speech Act Triad

In the present paper, there is neither space, nor is it my intention to give a complete account of speech act theory. Nonetheless, I must attempt to give a very limited account and description of it as such. Many lengthier works give summaries of the history of the development of speech act theory *qua* speech act theory, which I cannot reproduce here. The discussion around speech act theory has progressed in its small, niche corner for the past few decades, but it still centers on the works of J. L. Austin and John R. Searle. It is to the preliminary works of these authors which I will give primary attention.

---

32 Cf. Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 5-12, 31-72. As a “theory,” the idea of speech acts has no single “creed” or “confession of faith.” Rather, various proponents argue and disagree about numerous fine points of minutiae. Nonetheless, it does have certain unifying themes and guiding principles, which we shall discuss in the next section.

The start to all of this came in 1955 when philosopher J. L. Austin delivered his famous William James Lectures at Harvard University. These twelve lectures were collected into the pivotal book How to Do Things With Words, which became the primary text with which one must interact for a basic understanding of speech act theory. Austin begins with the rather unassuming statement, “What I shall have to say here is neither difficult nor contentious; the only merit I should like to claim for it is that of being true, at least in parts.”34 While this well describes his central assumptions, given the subsequent debates and discussions, however, this statement belies the richer and fuller difficulties created by his work. The opening presupposition with which Austin takes issue is the so-called “descriptive fallacy.”35 He decries that which was “for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact’, which it must do either truly or falsely.”36

Given my opening salvo regarding “meaning,” this should sound familiar. The “descriptive fallacy” then, according to Austin, is the false notion that a statement is the utterance of some factual information. This information, once again, seemingly dwells in the intellectual realm, and passes from mind to mind via the true statement of such by a speaker. This sort of statement Austin calls a constative, distinguishing it from a performative, the latter being something which is not a description of doing that thing, but the actual doing of the thing.37 Interestingly, however,


35 Compare Briggs, Words in Action, 38.

36 Austin, Things With Words, 1. I must also point out the echoes in this statement of the description given by C. S. Lewis of “The Green Book” of “Gaius” and “Titius” mentioned in the Introduction.

37 Ibid., 6.
Austin’s work constitutes a set of starts and re-starts as every few lectures he begins by doubting everything he previously had said. Thus, as Briggs notes, *How to Do Things With Words* “does not propose a performative-constative distinction so much as show that fact-stating utterances are but one type of performative.”38 And so, Austin moves beyond a simplistic explanation of a performative-constative distinction into further exploration.

As Austin moves forward, he proposes what he calls “speech acts”: those utterances in which or by which a speaker does something. He says, “Here we should say that in saying these words we are doing something—namely, marrying, rather than reporting something, namely that we are marrying.”39 Stated otherwise, a speech act is something one does simply by saying he is doing so. Examples of this would be, “I do” in a wedding ceremony, “I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*” in a ship launching, or “I give and bequeath my watch to my brother” in a will. In saying these things, one is not describing the action of doing it, he is doing it.40

What then, if anything, is the difference between a performative and a speech act?

Mitchell Green helpfully summarizes:

‘Performative’ is another technical term, as used here it refers in the first instance to a kind of sentence. A performative sentence is in the first person, present tense, indicative mood, active voice, that describes its speaker as performing a speech act. ‘I assert that George is the culprit,’ is a performative sentence by this test. As we have seen, one can perform a speech act without uttering a performative. Further, since it is merely a type of sentence, one can utter a performative without performing a speech act. For instance, while talking in my sleep I might say, “I hereby promise to climb the Eiffel Tower,” without thereby making any promise. We may also define


40 Ibid., 6.
a performative utterance as an utterance of a performative sentence that is also a speech act.\footnote{Green, “Speech Acts.”}

Here, we get the hint that there must be some sort of criteria or conditions which govern the usage of speech acts. Performatives are such by virtue of their linguistic construction. For instance, “I declare you not guilty,” uttered under any circumstance is a \textit{de jure} performative. But if I, not being duly entrusted with the robe and gavel of judgeship, were to pronounce some serial killer “not guilty” using this performative, \textit{nothing would happen}. It is what Austin would call an “infelicity,” a circumstance in which what one \textit{intended} to do \textit{did not happen}. It is only when certain conditions are met that the performative becomes a speech act, and Austin gives three conditions—each with two parts—which comprise this fact. In the first place, there must be some “accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect”, and there must be fitting persons involved who can appropriately invoke this procedure. In the second place, “the procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly” and “completely.” In the third place, if the procedure includes “certain thoughts or feelings” or is intended for the purposes of outlining “consequential conduct,” then the people involved must have those thoughts and feelings or wish to inaugurate that consequent, and must act accordingly.\footnote{Austin, \textit{Things With Words}, 14-15. Green calls these “conditions of successful utterance,” in “Speech Acts.”} And so, at any point along this line, there can be “misfires.” Something can “go wrong” which prevents the speech act from actually taking place. There can be “misinvocation” (the wrong thing was said or there was no such convention), “misapplication” (not done properly), “misexecutions” (the convention
wasn’t performed properly), and also “abuses” (proper convention performed properly, but insincerely). As an example of one such infelicity, “a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage.”\textsuperscript{43} The actor in a Broadway production, or in a Hollywood movie, who takes part in a wedding scene is not thereby married to his stage or screen “spouse,” because the criteria and conditions which make a valid marriage are not realized. And we could no doubt think of others: a bill passed by senators in a high school government class simulation is not binding law, an online social media mob crying “you are guilty” is not a legal declaration of guilt, and one’s promise to fly to the moon and bring back a plate of cheese in an hour is immediately understood by all parties to be impossible.

This brings us, in due time, to Austin’s crowning offering: his speech act triad. After exploring all of these things, from the constative-performative distinction through other observations about social criteria for speech acts, Austin’s eighth lecture classifies what he calls the three aspects of the entire speech act event. Coining new terms, he describes “the act of saying something” as \textit{locution}.\textsuperscript{44} That is, in the case of verbal speech, the physical process of forming words and sounds with the mouth and throat. But lest we were to think that we can “locute” in a way disconnected from any other acts, he says “to perform a locutionary act is in general, we may say, also and \textit{eo ipso} to perform an \textit{illocutionary act}.”\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Illocution}, then, is the act performed in or by a particular \textit{locution}, and may include things such as asking, answering, informing, assuring, warning, giving a verdict, sentencing, appointing,

\textsuperscript{43} Austin, \textit{Things With Words}, 22.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 98.
appealing, criticizing, identifying, or even, surprisingly, giving a description.\textsuperscript{46} Thus far, two of the three aspects of Austin’s triad. Along with his description of these two, he distinguishes “force” from “meaning.” According to Austin, “meaning” is the sense and reference of a statement, whereas the “force” is what it does.\textsuperscript{47} Third in the triad is *perlocution*. After someone has *locuted* an *illocution*—or in less technical language, uttered a speech act—that action will produce feelings, thoughts, or actions in the hearer, which Austin calls the *perlocutionary* effect.\textsuperscript{48} But interestingly, though we have a particular intention in our illocutions, we cannot completely force a perlocution. Austin writes, “[W]e can say ‘I argue that’ or ‘I warn you that’ but we cannot say ‘I convince you that’ or ‘I alarm you that’.”\textsuperscript{49} We can be very convincing, and our words can be alarming, but whether they convince or alarm depends on the hearer’s understanding of and agreement with what we have said.

Finally, Austin leaves us with five tentative “classes” of illocutions. These are “first person singular present indicative active” verbs which ought to show up in any of our illocutions. These five are: 1) *verdictives* (those illocutions which give a verdict or a judgment in some matter), 2) *exercitives* (those which exercise rights or powers, such as

\textsuperscript{46} Austin, *Things With Words*, 98-99. I say “surprisingly,” because Austin has taken great pains to distinguish the speech act from what is typically thought of as mere description. But the recognition that description is itself an act redeems it and reformulates it. Vern Poythress recognizes: “One of the points of speech-act theory is to awaken us to the fact that assertions of fact are only one of a number of kinds of speech act.” Vern Poythress, “Canon and Speech Act: Limitations in Speech-Act Theory with Implications for a Putative Theory of Canonical Speech Acts,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 338, accessed October 9, 2018, \url{http://search.ebscohost.com.rts.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001700972&site=ehost-live}.

\textsuperscript{47} Austin, *Things With Words*, 100.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 101.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 103-104. We will want to keep this in mind for later, when we discuss God’s illocutions. May we say about his words that they cannot in-and-of-themselves “convince” or “alarm”?
appointing or voting), 3) *commissives* (those which promise or commit to something), 4) *behabitves* (attitudes and social behavior such as apology, congratulation, or condolence), and 5) *expositives* (words which fit our utterance into our argument, such as “I argue,” “I assume,” etc.).

Austin recognizes that these five are imperfect, but leaves them as they are, as good starting points.

As mentioned earlier, Austin is not the only expositor of speech act theory, but he is its progenitor. Unfortunately, however, he died relatively young and so we will never know what his fully-matured thought would have been. Happily, his pupil, John R. Searle, continued his explorations. As Kevin J. Vanhoozer has aptly put it, “If Austin is the Luther of speech act philosophy, John Searle may be considered its Melanchthon—its systematic theologian. Both agree that the basic unit of meaning is not the word but the speech act.”

Searle’s career has continued from his earliest foray into speech act theory, 1969’s *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, well into the second decade of the 21st century. The years have seen Searle’s account of speech act theory shifted slightly, as Mitchell Green has pointed out, nonetheless his early work remains—like Austin—one of

---

50 Austin, *Things With Words*, 151.


53 For example, Green writes, “Searle 1969 had argued that a performative formula such as ‘I promise to . . .’ is an ‘illocutionary force indicator’ in the sense that it is a device whose role is to make explicit the force of the speaker's utterance. Making something explicit, however, would seem to involve characterizing an independent event or state of affairs, and as a result Searle's account presupposes that speakers can imbue their utterances with the force of demotions and excommunications; yet this is what was to be explained. Realizing this, in later work Searle and Vanderveken (1985) characterize performatives as speech acts having the force of declarations.” Green, “Speech Acts.”
the foundational works in the exploration of speech act theory. The remainder of this section will briefly outline Searle’s additions to the work of Austin, from his book *Speech Acts*.

Perhaps Searle’s most “significant contribution to the theory was Searle’s discussion of illocutions as ‘rule governed’ behaviour [sic].”54 Austin briefly discussed accepted conventions and procedures which govern speech acts, but did not give it much emphasis or shape. Searle, however, makes this central to his philosophy of language, saying:

> Speaking a language is engaging in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior. To learn and master a language is . . . to learn and to have mastered these rules.55

I should point out here that there is an inherent objectivity (or normativity) to our usage of language. For English speakers *in toto*, “potato” simply cannot mean “close the door,” without a significant change in the rules of language. Normativity will be discussed further in a subsequent section.

Like Austin ultimately suggests, Searle states that:

> linguistic communication involves linguistic acts. The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence, or even the token of the symbol, word or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act.56

In other words, for Searle, we could say that the *locution* is the basic unit of communication, which of course assumes that there can be no meaning without expression. I can not *mean something* unless I have actually *said it*. And thus:

---


56 Ibid., 16.
a study of the meaning of sentences is not in principle distinct from a study of speech acts. Properly construed, they are the same study.  

From this comes Searle’s “principle of expressibility.” That is, anything that can be meant can be expressed. Stated as a formal definition, “For any meaning \(X\) and any speaker \(S\) whenever \(S\) means \ldots \(X\) then it is possible that there is some expression \(E\) such that \(E\) is an exact expression of or formulation of \(X\).” So Searle hypothesizes that speech acts are the most fundamental building blocks of communication. And this hypothesis, taken with the “principle of expressibility,” shows that speech acts, speaker meaning, sentence meaning, speaker intention, hearer understanding, and the rule-governed linguistic elements are all connected and interrelated with one another.

One way Searle tries to express the interconnectivity of all of these aspects is in the suggestion that hearer understanding is central. He writes, “If I am trying to tell someone something, then (assuming certain conditions are satisfied) as soon as he recognizes that I am trying to tell him something and exactly what it is I am trying to tell him, I have succeeded in telling it to him.” Some have criticized this statement, because it leaves open the possibility that one can recognize another’s intention before he even speaks. We have all, at one time or another, finished or had finished a sentence. A friend we know quite well begins saying something, and we quickly recognize where they are going with it, or vice versa. Men are often baffled when women somehow have communicated something without having spoken, and immediately all do something in sync before we can even figure out what happened. This

---

58 Ibid., 20.
59 Ibid., 47.
would seem to undercut Searle’s suggestion, for example, because I cannot inherit a piece of property merely by virtue of recognizing that my grandfather was intending to communicate that I was to inherit it, via hand gestures and grunts as he is on his death bed. A valid will is, to borrow Searle’s language, a rule-governed communicative action, requiring proper documentation, signatures, and so forth. As Green observes, “speech acts involve intentional undertaking of a publicly accessible commitment”; and further, “commitment is not undertaken simply by virtue of my intending to undertake it, even when it is common knowledge that this is what I am trying to do.” Nevertheless, Searle’s basic point is an important one, as he has “sought increasingly to ground his philosophy of language in an intentionality-based approach to the philosophy of mind.” The intention of the speaker and the understanding of the hearer are important for the act to be, so to speak, felicitous.

In a later work, seeking to counter Wittgenstein and others who suggested that there are infinite ways to use human language, Searle writes, “If we adopt illocutionary point as the basic notion on which to classify uses of language, then there are a rather limited number of basic things we do with language.” Austin had attempted to classify all of the types of illocutions, leaving a series of five categories. However, Searle noticed that Austin’s taxonomy, and his lists of examples of each category, were “not classifications of illocutionary acts but of English illocutionary verbs.” So he attempted to modify and clarify

---

60 Green, “Speech Acts.”
61 Briggs, Words in Action, 44.
63 Ibid., 9.
Austin’s categories, leaving us with his own taxonomy of five basic types of illocutionary acts: 1) assertives (which tell people how things are), 2) directives (which try to get them to do things), 3) commissives (which commit ourselves to doing things), 4) expressives (which express our feelings and attitudes), and 5) declarations (which bring about changes through our utterances. Each of these taxonomies, though perhaps imperfect and open to critique, serve an important purpose: they direct us in how we ought to think of our illocutionary speech acts, showing us what we are doing and how to do it.

This has been an oversimplified foray into a topic to which lengthy books have been devoted. Speech act theory has many facets and streams of thought. Nonetheless, these basic considerations should equip us as we continue forward in the present study. Barker gives a few observations that are useful for us as we conclude this section. He says, “a major claim of speech act theory is that the locution, while it contains noematic content, does not have a meaning outside of its employment in authorial discourse. There is no such thing as the meaning of text outside of its illocutionary force.” And further, “according to speech act theory it is the illocution that carries the ‘force’ and not the perlocution.” If this all sounds familiar, I have done what I set out to do. Meaning, as we have already seen Frame point out, is not an entity that lives in some formless and void “phantom zone” outside of reality. To quote him again, “to ask for the meaning of an expression is to ask for an application.” Or to reframe him in the language we have now received from Austin and Searle, to ask for the

---

64 Searle, Expression, viii. These categories are explained at greater length in Searle, Expression, 12-20.


66 Frame, Knowledge of God, 97.
meaning of an expression assumes that there is an expression (a locution), that the expression has a particular force (an illocution), and that the hearer has been affected by it (a perlocution).

Sayers’ Maker Triad

No doubt, for some who are deeply saturated in theology and biblical studies, something like speech act theory, being as it is a technical dimension of a different discipline, may seem strange, cheerless, or even simplistic. It is possible that in a perfect world we would not need to be having this discussion. But given what we saw as the “Green Book Problem,” following Lewis (see the introduction), it is a very real and open question. The linguistic strictures of speech act theory may seem humorless, but more than two decades before the official enunciation of something called “speech act theory” by Austin, a far more literary and analogical exploration had been attempted by Dorothy L. Sayers. Today, Sayers might be best known by the company she kept, notables such as C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. However, she was an incisive scholar and author herself, writing things as diverse as plays, detective novels, and works of literary criticism. Her translation and commentary on Dante’s Divine Comedy is a crowning achievement as well. But her work, The Mind of the Maker, is an exploration of the analogy of the creative mind to the Trinity, and bears striking resemblance to tenets of later speech act theory. Sayers writes, “The habit, very prevalent today, of dismissing words as ‘just words’ takes no account of their power.”67 If speech act theory is drab, the “Maker Triad” of Sayers is certainly colorful.

Sayers begins her preface by qualifying the work, saying that it is not a work of
apologetics or a formalized statement of her beliefs about religion, but a “commentary” on
statements in the creeds of Christendom. Specifically, we would deduce, the statements of the
Nicene Creed, “I believe in one God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth, and of
all things visible and invisible,” and “and in one Lord Jesus Christ . . . by whom all things
were made.” Strange as it may seem to a modern reader, she seems to go out of her way to
repeatedly argue that the book is not a personal testimony about her beliefs. Astoundingly,
she adds: “It is necessary to issue this caution, for the popular mind has grown so confused
that it is no longer able to receive any statement of fact except as an expression of personal
feeling.” Here is, we should notice, an acknowledgement of the “Green Book Problem,”
and a statement of her disdain for it. In a society in which language is used to simply
describe one’s feelings (cf., “The waterfall is sublime”), one can not state an objective fact.
Thus, Sayers sets out to show that creedal statements about “the Mind of the Divine Maker
represent, as far as I am able to check them by my experience, true statements about the mind
of the human maker.” And so we see a hint of something else we shall see later: that human
words can analogically (yet truly) work as God’s words work. Or as Vern Poythress says,

---

Emphasis added.

69 Sayers, Maker, ix.

70 On first reading, Sayers could sound a bit flimsy. A 21st-century Christian apologist stating again
and again, “I am not saying what I believe, but what the Church teaches,” would sound insincere and
incredible. But upon closer reading, it is evident that Sayers is not saying these things out of
cowardice, but for the larger purposes of “making a point.” She wants to force her reader to have to
think critically about facts, rather than getting stuck wondering about her personal feelings. There is,
as we shall see, a deeper third level, however, at which what she is saying is what she thinks. I will
explain further below.

71 Sayers, Maker, xiii-xiv.
“Artistic creation imitates the creative activity of God,”\textsuperscript{72} whether in literature or other media.

In chapter 2, Sayers sets out the analogical nature of language, saying that any language we may use to describe God must “necessarily be analogical,” for:

all language about everything is analogical; we think in a series of metaphors. We can explain nothing in terms of itself, but only in terms of other things.\textsuperscript{73}

To describe a waterfall as “sublime,” we must have a conception of what “sublimity” is, or more specifically, of something else which is our standard of “sublimity.” On a narrow, personal level, a child may learn words which describe his small world in terms of itself (“milk” is milk, “ball” is a ball, “more” is more food). But these words originate somewhere, and on a broad—perhaps realist—level (the level Sayers seems to be operating on), these words taken together form analogies about things. The import of this realization, related to Sayers’ particular interest, is that credal formulations are initially received as descriptive pictures, but “when our own experience is brought into relation with the experience of the men who framed the creeds . . . we are able to say: ‘I recognize that for a statement of experience; I know now what the words mean.’”\textsuperscript{74} Thus “meaning” is tied closely to experience, according to Sayers. I would interject, since we are thinking broadly about speech act theory, that if Sayers is right—and I suspect she is—then to have words connect with our experience is to have those words do something, however basic a thing it may be. And so, when we call God the “Creator,” we are describing a being who acts in a way which

\textsuperscript{72} Vern Sheridan Poythress, \textit{In the Beginning Was the Word} (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 34.

\textsuperscript{73} Sayers, \textit{Maker}, 22-23.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 26. I emphasize the clause “what the words mean,” to highlight some commonality with themes in the present paper.
is orders of magnitude above the ordinary “creating” of humans. Nevertheless, by calling God “Creator,” we are speaking analogically from something we do know. Sayers explains:

> We know a father and picture to ourselves an ideal Father; similarly, we know a human ‘maker’ and picture to ourselves an ideal ‘Maker.’ If the word ‘Maker’ does not mean something related to our human experience of making, then it has no meaning at all.

Words have meanings, she explains, when they have real connection or consequence in the real world of our experience.

With these things in mind, we can approach her triad. There are “trinities”—or perhaps in less loaded parlance, “triads”—in various places in the world. For example, she describes what she calls a “trinity” of sight: the thing which is seen, the act of sight itself, and the focus of attention which is needed to connect both. Triads are inherent in the created order, and so she suggests her own “trinity” which describes the mind of the creative writer. First in her triad, there is the Idea: the thought or plan a writer formulates about what he plans to write. But interestingly, especially given what we have seen in speech act theory, this Idea is not merely the formulation of the mental information or data. The Idea is only self-

---

75 Sayers suggests that humans, properly speaking, do not even “create.” What we do is “make,” and when God “creates,” he is “making” things, but on a higher scale than our making, yet still analogical.

76 Ibid., 27.

77 Ibid., 36. Again, though this may be getting ahead of myself, I can not help but throw up a notice of a mental bookmark we should keep here to remember as we get further into the work of John Frame, whose work is a veritable encyclopedia of triads. See, for instance, his appendix “More Triads,” in John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 743-750, which lists 112 individual triads we find in various areas of life.

78 As a caveat before summarizing her creative triad, I must point out that by her own admission (cf. Ibid., 38) she is not using these terms in the “philosophical” sense. These are words which have some baggage due to their use in various schools of philosophy, but that is not what she means. Rather, she means them, specifically, in the sense in which an author would mean them when writing a story.
aware in the second part of the triad, the Energy.\textsuperscript{79} Thus, Sayers says, “The Idea, that is, cannot be said to precede the Energy in time, because (so far as that act of creation is concerned) it is the Energy that creates the time-process.”\textsuperscript{80} Just as a locution cannot be separated from its illocution, so Sayers’ Idea cannot be separated from its Energy, or outworking manifestation: they occur simultaneously. Indeed, the “writer cannot even be conscious of his Idea except by the working of the Energy which formulates it to himself.”\textsuperscript{81} It seems to me that anyone who has written anything of substance knows this to be the case from experience. While I have outlined the present paper, and have its general concepts in my thoughts, it is only in \textit{actually writing it} (my Energy) that my Idea can even be described!

Third is the Power, which is what the work means as the hearer or reader responds to it.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the Power, is that it is the “means by which the Activity [\textit{viz.} the Energy] is communicated to other readers and \textit{which produces a corresponding response in them.”}\textsuperscript{82} This has astounding similarities, let the reader understand, to perlocution. For Sayers, all of this finds its particular basis in the “metaphors” used by the Christian creeds about the mind of the Maker; that is, of God. If the creeds describe God as Creator in such a way as we can understand from our experience as “sub-creators” or

\textsuperscript{79} Sayers admits that she should perhaps have called this part the “Activity” rather than the “Energy,” due to the possible implications of the word “energy” when discussing Trinitarian theology, and throughout the book she vacillates unhelpfully between the two. I shall maintain her initial terminology, while understanding this clarification. Additionally, I recognize this discussion, even while purposely avoiding any entrance into the subject of Trinitarian theology here. See Sayers, \textit{Maker}, 40.

\textsuperscript{80} Sayers, \textit{Maker}, 38.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 41. Emphasis mine.
“makers” in the image of the Creator and Maker, we ought therefore to further honor the truth of the creeds.

So we have Sayers’ Maker triad: Idea, Energy, and Power. But there are a handful of other observations of hers which add to its connection to the interests at hand. Sayers says that all of God’s creation, which has its origin in him, is therefore included in his personality. And yet, “as soon as they are expressed in material form they have a separate reality for us.”83 That is, God’s creation takes on true meaning when it is received and used by us, and in a sense, that is also his “meaning” in all of it. In human terms again, for the reader of a book, Sayers says that the purpose of reading a book is not to use it as a vehicle into the inner sanctum of the author’s mind. Finding out what the author meant is not coterminous with being able to recreate his thought process in composing it. Again, “meaning” is not simply the incorporeal thoughts of the author’s mind.84 Rather, the book itself is what the author meant to say. And so to continue asking “What did you mean by this book?” is something of a non sequitur. It is fruitless to think “that we can ever be made directly aware of the Idea—the writer himself is not aware of it except through the Energy and all he can communicate to us is the Energy made manifest in Power.”85 Thus when one says something, he becomes more aware of his own thoughts in saying it, and his thought is manifested in his words which then invite a response from those who hear.

83 Sayers, Maker, 56.

84 As I have shown a handful of times already, however, my saying “X is not Y” does not mean that “X is unrelated to Y.” By saying “meaning is not thoughts,” I do not intend to communicate that when we learn an author’s meaning we can say nothing of his thoughts. Sayers says as much in Maker, 111 and 122, quoted below on page 70.

85 Sayers, Maker, 57.
Frame’s Covenantal Triad

Inarguably, the beginning of my thinking about this subject came from interacting with the work of John Frame, and so it is fitting to cap off this discussion of triads by discussing his. Central to Christianity is the lordship of Yahweh, the Triune God. The basic confession of faith for believers in this God, whether in the Old Covenant or the New Covenant is that this God—manifested specifically as Yahweh in the Old Covenant and physically in the person of Christ in the New—is the Lord. And if that is our confession, then as Frame says, that is the basic message of the Scriptures. The message of the Old Testament is “God is Lord”; the message of the New Testament is “Jesus Christ is Lord.”86 Or slightly more broadly, the confession of God’s lordship is “that Yahweh, the Lord, is the one and only true God, and that therefore he deserves all of our love and allegiance.”87 For God’s people, his lordship means that he is covenantally bound to them, and that he is their head. If he is their head, then he is transcendent—exalted far above humanity. If he is covenantally bound to his people, then he is immanent—closely related and near to them. But for Frame, this transcendent and immanent lordship of God has three aspects inherent in it, which can be called the covenantal triad, or the lordship attributes: control, authority, and presence.

The Lord’s control is seen in his sovereignly initiating covenants with man. But his control is not seen only in his making of covenants; it is seen in his ordaining of all things, and specifically covenantally, his ordaining of all things in the lives of his people. So he

86 Frame, *Knowledge of God*, 11-12. See Dt. 6:4ff; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; and Phil. 2:11.

87 Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 22.
creates his people from nothing, and controls all aspects of their lives (Is. 41:4; 43:10-13; 44:6; 48:12ff; Ex. 3:8, 14). In exercising control over his people, he can even marshal all of the physical forces of nature, as he shows in dealing his “crushing defeat to the most powerful totalitarian government of the day,” namely Egypt, when he sends wonders and mighty deeds at the Exodus (Ex. 3:19-20; 4:21; 6:1-8; 7:3-5; 12:12; 15:11; 18:11), culminating in his giving of the Law which identifies him as the very one who 1) is their God, and 2) brought them out of Egypt. Indeed, his control is all-encompassing and efficacious (Is. 55:11; Zech. 1:6; Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Prov. 21:30; Is. 46:10; Lam. 3:37-38; Rom. 8:28, 38-39; 9:21-24; Eph. 1:4-11; etc.). His control is such that no one can “stay his hand” or ask him, “What have you done?” (Dan. 4:35).

The Lord’s authority is seen in that he not only has the power to control things, but that he also has the right to. In other words, he has the “right to tell us what we ought to do.” With authority, of course, comes the necessary obedience of his people to what he says, without question, and beyond every other loyalty and authority (Ex. 20:2; Lev. 18:2-5, 30; Dt. 6:4-9; Mt. 8:19-22; Rom. 4:18-20; Phil. 3:8; Heb. 11:4-8, 17; etc.). His authority

---


91 Any quotations of Scripture throughout will be from the English Standard Version, 2011.

92 Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 80.

means that “he is the supreme lawgiver;”⁹⁴ and in the New Covenant we see this in the person of Christ who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18).

The Lord’s presence has a slightly different dimension. Whereas control and authority may be grouped under the heading of *transcendence*, presence is under *immanence*. God’s presence is not only to be understood as “nearness” to his people, but “may be further described as ‘covenant solidarity.’”⁹⁵ This solidarity is such that God “calls people into fellowship with himself” and so “becomes intimately present” with them.⁹⁶ As we will see more closely in chapter 3, this is explicated at a foundational level in the “covenant formula,” which is his statement that “I will be your God and you shall be my people” (Lev. 26:12; Ex. 29:45; 2 Sam. 7:14; Rev. 21:2-7).⁹⁷ So most importantly, God’s presence or “covenant solidarity” is manifested as his covenant bond with his people, but beyond that, he is present in time (cf. Dt. 32:7; Is. 26:4), present in place (e.g., his special presence at Sinai, prefiguring the tabernacle and temple: Ex. 3:2-5; 12; 19:22; cf. Jn. 1:14; 2:21), present in blessing and cursing (cf. Ex. 33:19), and present in creation (Ps. 139:7-10).⁹⁸ The most awe-inspiring part of God’s presence, however, is in its culmination, which is the coming of Immanuel: God with us.⁹⁹

---

⁹⁵ Frame, *Knowledge of God*, 16.
⁹⁶ Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 94.
The covenantal triad or lordship attributes relate to Frame’s second major triad, which grows from the former. We could summarize that each of the lordship attributes—control, authority, and presence—represent a particular “perspective” in the relationship of God with his people. This idea of “perspectives” plays, arguably, an even larger role in Frame’s thought, especially his later thought. In defining what he means by a “perspective,” Frame adopts Poythress’s definition (another triad!). A perspective, according to Poythress, is “a (1) view of something (2) by someone (3) from somewhere.” If the three lordship attributes are biblical “themes,” our human perspectives are built in part by considering each of these themes “and expanding it into a perspective.” Thus, according to Frame, each perspective becomes “a position from which a person sees something.” Looking at something from different perspectives enables us to gain a clearer picture of that thing. If we are making a decision about right or wrong, we must first find out the law (or norm), then we must apply it to the situation ourself. We might ask three questions: “(1) What was the situation (the problem)? (2) How are you responding to it? (3) What does Scripture say?”

---


102 Poythress, *Knowing*, 262-263.


perspectives Frame applies to these three questions, respectively, are the *situational* perspective, the *existential* perspective, and the *normative* perspective.

How are these three perspectives useful? If a fuller perception of God is to be gained by approaching him from different perspectives, have we softened the claims of Christianity to be the one, true religion worshiping the one, true God? Is it not just some form of soft pantheism or polytheism to say that we need multiple perspectives? Is it not the case that positing different perspectives leads to doctrinal and ethical relativism? The short answer is “no,” and this is why: Frame believes that this “perspectivalism”—the ability or inclination to look at something from these three perspectives—can help us understand “the divine attributes, the persons of the Trinity, the aspects of human personality, the commandments of the Decalogue, the order of the divine decrees, the offices of Christ, and perhaps other matters as well.”

In other words, these triads *unite* rather than *separate* the truths of God. For two examples, we can look at the concepts of God’s revelation, and of epistemology, perspectivally. In God’s revelation to mankind, there is *general revelation* which is his revelation of his characteristics, qualities, and attributes in the natural world (cf. Rom. 1:18-32; this would be the *situational* perspective). There is also *special revelation* which is God’s revelation of his being, nature, thoughts, and commands in human language (this is the *normative* perspective: God the lawgiver giving his laws). Thirdly, and probably less often considered by systematic theologians, there is *existential revelation* which is God’s revealing something of his own image in and through other image bearers (this is, obviously, the

---

existential perspective). Similarly, related to epistemology (our knowing of things), the normative perspective is what God authoritatively tells us through his law; the situational is God’s controlling of the details of our life through his special and general revelation; and the existential is our increasing knowledge of the law as we learn to know ourselves and others more fully. So rather than splitting apart revelation or epistemology into a relativistic system which affirms the goodness of any and all postulations, these three perspectives cement revelation and epistemology as a unique whole.

But what keeps this covenantal triad and the perspectival triad ultimately from being anywhere close to soft pantheism or polytheism is the fact that they always go together. The ultimate underpinning of this unity is the fact of the Trinity. In the economy of the Trinity, the Father “acts as supreme authority,” the Son “is the executive power” or control, and the Spirit is “the pervasive presence.” Yet while the three Persons may have different economic emphases, they are not “parts” of God, for God is not made up of “parts.” So as we cannot have the Father without the Son, and so on, each of the attributes of the covenantal triad (control, authority, and presence) and each of the perspectival triad (normative, situational, and existential) also entail one another. Each perspective is just a perspective, not a separate piece of reality, just as the divine attributes are not pieces which collectively “build” God.

106 This discussion of the triperspectivity of revelation adapted from Frame, Three Dimensions, 9.
107 Cf. Frame, Knowledge of God, 75.
108 Frame, Three Dimensions, 19.
109 Ibid., 15. This would be the doctrine of “divine simplicity,” also discussed in Frame, Doctrine of God, 225-230.
110 Frame, Three Dimensions, 25.
You do not get one of the three lordship attributes without the other, nor can you use one perspective without the others. Frame explains, speaking specifically of the covenantal triad:

It is also important that we see the three lordship attributes as forming a unit, not as separate from one another. . . . God’s control, according to Scripture, involves authority, for God controls even the structure of truth and rightness. Control involves presence, for God’s power is so pervasive that it brings us face to face with Him in every experience. Authority involves control, for God’s commands presuppose His full ability to enforce them. Authority involves presence, for God’s commands are clearly revealed and are the means by which God acts in our midst to bless and curse. Presence involves control, lest anything in heaven or earth should keep us from God or Him from us. Presence involves authority, for God is never present apart from His Word.111

If this seems slightly oblique, Frame illustrates with a triangular diagram (Figure 1 below112):

![Figure 1](image1.png)

![Figure 2](image2.png)

Very simply, in Figure 1, Frame’s triangle illustrates the connectivity between the three perspectives. The normative, as standing “above” us, is at the top. In Figure 2, I have adapted Frame’s diagram to illustrate what I have hinted at in the foregoing discussion: namely, that the two triads are really two ways of describing the same sort of relationship. Authority relates the the normative perspective, and so on. Triangles well illustrate what I have

111 Frame, Knowledge of God, 17-18.

112 This diagram is found in Frame, Knowledge of God, 75; and Frame, Three Dimensions, 25.
described of this relationship between the three perspectives: as each perspective and each attribute connects with and entails one another, so all vertices of the triangle connect to one another via the sides.

Excursus: These Three Triads

I have presented a triad of triads: the speech act triad, the Maker triad, and the covenantal triad. Each of these triads arose independently in the work of their respective authors—though no doubt these were influenced by other authors who went before them—and to my knowledge have not been drawn together in this format before. So I will briefly explain how they overlap and relate. Despite the fact that they have individual interests and areas of concern, they interface usefully, in ways that will give us the framework with which to further assess performative speech below.

Very simply, the speech act triad concerns the basic sounds and information emerging from the mind (locution), the thing being done in speaking these words which typically affects a scenario out “in front” of us (illocution), and the response of the hearer in their person (perlocution). The Maker triad concerns the information and propositions in the mind (Idea), which are then worked outwardly onto a page to be read (Energy), and the “flowing” of the work back to the author, or the entrance into and affecting of the reader (Power). The covenantal triad concerns a normative perspective above us (Authority), which affects a situation (Control), and also affects the existential being of the person involved (Presence). In each of the foregoing descriptions, there is an “above,” an “in front,” and an “inside” aspect,
generally speaking. Hence, I would suggest a slightly modified diagram to depict these triads and their relationships:

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 3**

I have changed the triangle from a standard triangle to a right triangle, oriented with the right angle on an $x$ and $y$ axis, to further highlight the person involved in each of these triads. There are, first, parts of each triad which represent something that sits “over” the person so to speak (Norm, Authority, and Idea). Second, there are parts of each triad which sit “in front of” the person (Situation, Control, and Energy). And third, there are parts of each triad which sit “within” the person (Existence, Presence, and Power). But it may be less obvious why I have aligned the speech act triad in this way. Simply put, locution is the least “personal” aspect, which is more related to abstractions, illocution is what actually affects and does something in a situation, and perlocution is what relates to an individual.

Lastly, I would point out one other way to think of these triadic relationships. Frame writes, “the old philosophical distinction between self, world, and God . . . is another familiar
triad that ties in with our analysis,” but never actually ties it in with his analysis. Given what we have seen above, we could overlay this triad onto my modified triangle below (Figure 4). The purpose in observing this would be to simplify the relationships I suggested above, which is to say that something is “above” us (God, in this case), there is something “in front” of us (the world), and then there is “us” (the self).

Christian Applications of Speech Act Theory

Before moving ahead with my final observations in this chapter, I wish to give two snapshots of Christian theologians who are seeking to apply speech act theory to their work. The purpose here is not and cannot be full interaction, but simply brief description, showing that the enterprise of the application of speech act theory to Christian theology is by no means new, though I know of no one making the explicit triadic connections I have above. It

113 Frame, “Primer on Perspectivalism.”

114 As a thought experiment, I would suggest that it is fairly self-evident that these three pieces, when not working in harmony, lead to strife, enmity, and conflict. When a person is not subject to the lordship of God, his interaction with the world is affected (i.e. conflicts and wars become the norm). Similarly, friendship with the world is enmity with God (Js. 4:4), another breaking of the triad. And we could explore this further. The breaking of this triad creates, as it were, an “anti-triad” or an inversion, pitting the world, the flesh, and the devil against the world, the self, and God.
is to answer the question, “How is speech act theory being employed by theologians?” It is important to have some sense or awareness of the sorts of discussions one will encounter when researching these ideas in the larger conversation, and these snapshots serve to support my main thesis by setting some precedent for the types of implications I am drawing. I will describe the contributions of the two men who are likely the most prominent and prolific: Kevin Vanhoozer and Nicholas Wolterstorff.115 These snapshots will focus on the specific references to speech act theory.

Vanhoozer: Special Revelation and First Theology

Kevin J. Vanhoozer is among the first to openly, effectively, popularly, and at length apply speech act categories to Christian theology. His 1998 book, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, enters into the discussion of hermeneutics and the nature of “meaning.” Central to his thesis is the view “that meaning is independent of our attempts to interpret it.”116 That is, meaning is not dependent upon the reader’s experience or feelings about it, nor the reader’s social context and tradition, but is, as it were, above the reader. Meaning is not, however, “transcendent” in such a way that it is unknowable; rather meaning is “communicative action: both the ‘doing’ and the resultant ‘deed,’” or more precisely it is a “three-dimensional

115 Though this sort of application is still relatively small within academia, there are certainly others. Myriads of journal-article-length explorations have been published in recent years, but those who have contributed in book length are others such as Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); Dietmar Neufeld, *Reconceiving Texts as Speech Acts: An Analysis of 1 John* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1994); Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Gordon J. Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising With the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); as well as various works by Anthony C. Thiselton, such as *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: Collected Works With New Essays* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006).

communicative action, with form and matter (propositional content), energy and trajectory (illocutionary force), and teleology or final purpose (perlocutionary effect).”\textsuperscript{117} Understanding the meaning of some bit of speech, for Vanhoozer, is both grasping what was done in the utterance as well as the effects of that action. The very fact that we can understand these things makes communication possible. But of course, the application of such thinking to a text requires a few furthers steps. Thus, he defines a text as “a communicative act of a communicative agent fixed by writing.”\textsuperscript{118} A text is not just an imitation speech act, but is itself a speech act, albeit a silent one recorded with ink on a page. This is important, as he goes on to show,\textsuperscript{119} because the meaning of a text is not bound up in how it is taken by its reader, but in its intention by its author, expressed through his use of constitutive rules and institutional facts.\textsuperscript{120} Ultimately, we must assess the author’s intended action in terms of what he was doing in writing the text, and thus to understand it “is a matter of recognizing the author’s embodied and enacted intentions.”\textsuperscript{121} And when it comes to the desire to discern the meaning of the Scriptures, it is important, Vanhoozer says, to avoid searching for these meanings at the microscopic level. Rather, we must keep in mind the entire canonical history of redemption and revelation.

In his other major work relying on speech act theory, \textit{First Theology}, Vanhoozer suggests that rather than approaching the disciplines of theology proper, doctrine of

\begin{flushleft}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{117} Vanhoozer, \textit{Is There a Meaning}, 218.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 225. Emphasis in the original.
\item \textsuperscript{119} See Vanhoozer’s discussion of hermeneutical realism in \textit{Is There a Meaning}, 228-229.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Vanhoozer, \textit{Is There a Meaning}, 244-246.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 253. The question of whether and how the reader can come to know this intention is a subject he takes up later in the book, but is less important for our interest in speech acts.
\end{itemize}
\end{flushleft}
Scripture, and hermeneutics as separate “camps” with their own separate rules, we should treat them as one single issue. This combined approach to these three areas is what he means when he says “first theology.” At the center of this discussion is the Scripture itself, for we can have no full doctrine of God without reference to the Scripture, the question of hermeneutics is pointless without Scripture to interpret, and our doctrine of Scripture presupposes that it exists. Vanhoozer says that the Bible “is a diverse collection of God’s mighty speech acts which communicate the saving Word of God,” and suggests that this is a way forward in the ongoing debates about the nature of the Scripture and of God. In fact, “the principal mode in which God is ‘with’ his people is through speech acts,” for how could we “discern God’s presence or know anything whatsoever about God without communication on God’s part”? It is just at this point that Vanhoozer has a recent critic who questions his use of speech act theory, and whose critiques I want to engage with briefly.

Bruce Baugus raises concerns that Vanhoozer’s proposal vis-à-vis revelation and inspiration includes significant echoes of Karl Barth. This would pose an obvious problem for those holding to a historical view of the inspiration of Scripture, and this is another

---

122 Intentionally or unintentionally, Vanhoozer’s three main disciplines here form another triad. We could, perhaps, note the normative perspective of theology proper, the situational perspective of the doctrine of Scripture, and the existential perspective of hermeneutics. Theology proper describes God who sits over us; our doctrine of Scripture describes the control of God over revelation; and hermeneutics describe the ways in which we act in interpreting Scripture, and by which we also gain the wisdom of God by his working in us.

123 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, First Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 9.

124 Ibid., 131.

125 Ibid., 149.

contemporary example of the way in which speech act theory is being discussed broadly.

Baugus seems to have gotten hung up on one particular sentence from *First Theology*. In the section in question, Vanhoozer is arguing for a trinitarian approach to our doctrine of scripture using principles of speech act theory, especially hoping to find a way to bridge the gap between those who hold to the “identity thesis” (the view that the word of God is “in Scripture”) and those who critique this in favor of a more personal dimension of God’s revelation in which he reveals himself through the Scriptures, rather than in them.127 His suggestion is that “verbal revelation”—a very non-Barthian concept—could be better explained in terms of speech act theory,128 which in turn also recovers and enfolds the work of the Spirit into our thinking. “The Spirit,” Vanhoozer states, “does not alter the semantics of biblical literature. Locution and illocution inscribed in Scripture remain unchanged. The Spirit’s agency consists rather in bringing the illocutionary point home to the reader and so achieving the corresponding perlocutionary effect.”129 This is important to note as we come to Baugus’s concern: the propositional meaning is in the text—something Barth would not say. But that is not all there is to say about meaning, and the work of the Spirit to apply it to the hearer or reader is also involved.

Vanhoozer says the following, however, which is what catches the eye of Baugus:

---

127 Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 148. Interestingly for Baugus’s critique, it is the latter which describes Barth, and Vanhoozer is actually looking for a way to defend the “identity thesis.” On the same page, he states that he wants to hold onto the identity thesis, but define it in such a way that can “do full justice to the semantic as well as personal dimension of God’s self-revelation.” His goal is not to soften our doctrine of Scripture, but to take seriously its personal communication along with its propositional content. This is where speech act theory will become useful.

128 Ibid., 154.

129 Ibid., 155.
Perhaps the solution [to the question of whether God’s communicative act was successful if the reader misunderstands it] is to affirm both that Scripture is the Word of God (in the sense of divine locution and illocution) and that Scripture may become the Word of God (in the sense of achieving its intended perlocutionary effects).\textsuperscript{130}

Baugus complains that this is a “consequential departure from Protestant orthodoxy on biblical efficacy,”\textsuperscript{131} a pretty strong claim, if true. The heart of his critique seems to be this assessment of the differences between Barth and Vanhoozer:

Despite significant differences in their respective doctrines of Scripture, Vanhoozer agrees with Barth that God must perform some sort of act subsequent to the original authorial act in order for Scripture to become God’s active and efficacious word and that the Spirit is free to perform such an act or not on any given occasion. As such, each proposes that Scripture must become something like a divinely spoken word by the Spirit, in the moment, to become God’s efficacious word. For Barth, God’s word is always efficacious but Scripture is not always God’s word; for Vanhoozer, Scripture is always God’s word but is perlocutionarily impotent as divine discourse until activated by the Spirit.\textsuperscript{132}

I have quoted Baugus at length because I believe the source of his confusion in critique is highlighted a number of places in this quotation, and I would suggest two areas of response. First, Baugus claims that Vanhoozer believes that in order for the Scripture to “become” God’s efficacious word, the Holy Spirit has to do something. But this is not his view. By contrast, Vanhoozer says, “the Bible always achieves its perlocutionary effects, even when for some it is a fragrance of death (i.e., a word that hardens) rather than a fragrance of life (i.e., a word that occasions faith).”\textsuperscript{133} In other words, the Scriptures are God’s efficacious speech act, attended by the Spirit, whether its hearer responds in faith or rejection. It is

\textsuperscript{130} Vanhoozer, \textit{First Theology}, 156.

\textsuperscript{131} Baugus, “Living and Active,” 25.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 33. Emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{133} Kevin Vanhoozer, email message to author, November 8, 2018.
efficacious, but that efficacy is positive for some and negative for others. This takes nothing at all away from the Scripture itself, as Baugus claims: it is in fact always perlocutionarily potent. Second, Baugus perhaps does not fully appreciate the connectivity of locution, illocution, and perlocution, or the personal dimension of perlocution.\textsuperscript{134} When Vanhoozer says that perhaps Scripture becomes God’s word when it achieves its perlocutionary effects, he does not mean that anything is lacking in the text. Instead, he means that it becomes the effectual word of life for the person who is hearing it and responding in faith. Because the speech act triad holds tightly together, it will not do to claim that Vanhoozer’s (admittedly provocative) use of the word “become” in relation to perlocution means that this alleged “becoming” encapsulates everything that he is saying about Scripture. In other words, Vanhoozer had just stated that in its locution and illocution (really, in all of its material and propositional content) the Scripture is the word of God, so the “becoming” in relation to perlocution is simply its becoming effectual to salvation for the one who responds in faith, not its “becoming” something ontologically which it was not before.

Ultimately, Vanhoozer’s interest in this connection is the question of why many people do not believe. The Scriptures, as no doubt Baugus would agree, are “perspicuous”—they are clear. But if they are clear, and written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ (cf. Jn. 20:31), why do some reject them? In Vanhoozer’s application of speech act theory, the reason is because the Spirit has not illumined the hearts of those who hear and reject. He says:

To say that Scripture becomes the word of God in a perlocutionary sense is not to say that it is somehow deficient. It is simply to acknowledge the role of the Spirit’s

\textsuperscript{134} See Figure 3, on page 39 above.
internal testimony. And this is good Reformed theology: word and Spirit work together on both ends, inspiration and illumination.\footnote{Kevin Vanhoozer, email message to author, November 8, 2018.}

Having surveyed some of Vanhoozer’s thinking, and engagement with it, we can better see how viewing the doctrine of Scripture with the helpful triadic framework of speech act theory allows us to not only uphold its nature as a body of God’s pure and perfect propositional truths to mankind, but also to see how these truths penetrate to the heart of persons. As a result, we also have a clearer picture of how speech act theory works when applied to varying disciplines.

Wolterstorff and Divine Discourse

Nicholas Wolterstorff’s work, \textit{Divine Discourse}, is another key in the realm of speech act theory and Christian theology. As a philosopher and and theologian, his writing is meditative and thoughtful, with a style far less analytic than that of Austin and Searle. And especially compared to Vanhoozer’s dense, orderly, and systematic style filled with references and quotations, Wolterstorff is far more meandering and almost stream-of-consciousness in its presentation. So because its structure is less segmented and outlined, I will only mention a few salient points made in this provocative book.

The opening eight pages are made up of Wolterstorff considering the well-known episode from the \textit{Confessions} in which Augustine hears a voice cry, “\textit{Tolle lege}”—“Take it and read.” This, he says, is an instance of a divine discourse, not because the speaker meant it that way, but because God used it that way. This is questionable from a verbal inspiration sort of perspective, but certainly it is true that God used it sovereignly, even as he uses other
seemingly coincidental situations to shake or to build someone’s faith. But when it comes to Scriptural interpretation, Wolterstorff is interested not in “excavative scholarship” which tries to constantly find something “behind” the text, but in “interpreting Scripture for divine discourse.” What he wants to discover is the communication of God in the Scriptures, but along the way he suggests that discourse is separate from revelation. My speaking to someone does reveal things about myself to them, but he says that the act of speaking is the content of that revelation, not the revelation itself. Further, simply communicating some heretofore unknown information is not necessarily the revelation of something else; it only becomes revelation if it has “the character of unveiling the veiled, of uncovering the covered, of exposing the obscured to view.” All of this serves to distinguish between what he calls “non-manifestational” and “manifestational” revelation. A non-manifestational revelation does not actually reveal the thing: for example, my asserting that “the sky is blue” did not manifest the sky to you. Manifestational revelation does reveal the thing in some way: my grunting and punching the wall manifested via natural signs that I was upset. However, to speak is not to communicate. To speak, for Wolterstorff, is to take up “a certain sort of normative stance,” part of what he would later call a “normative theory of discourse,” or we could say in other terms uttering words that fall into a certain rule-governed framework.


137 See Wolterstorff, Divine Discourse, 20. The import of this suggestion is to separate the locutionary act (along with, perhaps, the propositional content) from the illocutionary act (the thing as it actually happens).

138 Wolterstorff, Divine Discourse, 23.

139 Ibid., 28-32. These signs signify a propositional fact behind them. Wolterstorff also suggests a difference between “intended” and “non-intended” revelation through these sorts of signs.

140 Ibid., 35. Compare also what he says later, on page 76.
How do these explorations illumine our understanding of speech act theory? I can explain Wolterstorff’s distinctions between locution, illocution, and perlocution no more clearly than he:

Acts of asserting, commanding, promising, and asking (when brought about by locutionary acts) are all illocutionary acts; by contrast, acts of communicating knowledge, when brought about by illocutionary acts, are all perlocutionary acts. It was by uttering the words ‘the jewels are buried in the garden’ that the old man asserted that the jewels are buried in the garden; his uttering those words, which is the locutionary act in this case, counts as his asserting that proposition, this latter being the illocutionary act. In turn, it was by asserting that the jewels are buried in the garden, and by his addressees realizing that he was doing that, that he communicated the knowledge that the jewels were buried in the garden; his asserting that proposition, which is the illocutionary act, causally contributed to their coming to know that the jewels were buried in the garden. Illocutionary acts are related to locutionary acts by way of the counting as relation; perlocutionary acts are related to illocutionary acts by causality. Asserting, commanding, promising, and asking do not consist in the transmission of knowledge.\(^{141}\)

In this example, locution is the speaking, illocution is the assertion (et al), and perlocution is the act of communicating knowledge.

When this comes to discussion about Scripture, Wolterstorff describes the Bible as “divinely appropriated human discourse.”\(^{142}\) This sort of language should make us more uncomfortable, for it suggests that humans wrote the Bible and then God later decided to use it as his own discourse; a somewhat adoptionistic proposal. However, Wolterstorff does not seem to wholly deny that God was speaking in the original events recorded in Scripture, and in the original recording of the Scripture,\(^{143}\) yet his interest is to make sure to leave room for God to speak to our particular lives in the Scriptures now. This is not to say that God’s

---

\(^{141}\) Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 33. Emphasis in the original.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 53.

\(^{143}\) Ibid., 56.
speaking to us *now* is merely a matter of producing certain effects or responses in us, though that is included: it is to say that God’s illocutions *past*, recorded in Scripture, are his illocutions even to his people *now*, as the Church hears them.144

But probably the most important thing Wolterstorff adds to our present concern is his theory of “normative standing” within discourse, briefly mentioned above. When I utter a speech act $S$, in it I enter into some normative standing $N$ with the hearer $H$. In this case, $N$ is what it is, regardless of whether or not $H$ fully understands my meaning. Thus in this speech $S$, I have instituted “a way of acquiring rights and responsibilities,”145 which we should notice right away is very covenental-sounding language. If I say, “I will meet you at 5 for dinner,” I have entered into a normative standing of promise with you, in which I have the responsibility to meet you at 5 for dinner. By making this promise, I have “altered the moral relationship between us,”146 and the same is true for other sorts of speech acts beyond promises. Assertions, for instance—often thought of as a mere divulging of information or description of my feelings towards something—normatively assume that I have been given the right to be taken at my word, and that you have the responsibility to do so. This change in relationship is a key component to all speech acts. And so, Wolterstorff takes the “Green Book Problem” head on by saying, “to speak is not, as such, to express one’s inner self but to take up a normative stance in the public domain.”147 Thus for my purposes, Wolterstorff’s

---

144 Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 56 and 75-76. This is a worthy emphasis, though some of his presuppositions are problematic.

145 Ibid., 84.

146 Ibid., 85.

147 Ibid., 93.
idea of “normative standing” will interface meaningfully with later discussions of God’s speech acts to his people. In the next chapter, we will see how these observations aid very tangibly in our understanding of God’s covenant with man.

Retrospective Summary and Prospective Subsequence

Having now adduced and discussed our various triads—the speech act, Maker, and covenantal triads—it should become clear how the three central chapters of this paper are organized. These triads are not merely the “subject” of the paper, but also its “road map.” Chapter 2 is the “locution” of the basic concepts I wish to discuss. Chapter 3 is, in a sense, the “illocution,” as these concepts are applied to the Bible and Church history; it is the active part of the speech, as we watch the triads at work. And Chapter 4 is the “perlocution,” in which I suggest ways the Church ought to respond. Each chapter is titled accordingly, and keeping these triads in mind as we go forward is a useful way to remember where we are, and the general import of a given section to the greater discussion.
CHAPTER 3

SITUATION, CONTROL, & ENERGY

Performative Speech in the Scriptures

Now that we have the normative Idea of what speech act theory is, and have heard its “locution,” so to speak, it is now time to identify the situational Energy of its principles: what it does in real life, or its “illocution.” One area of discussion among those Christians who have done significant work on speech acts in the Scriptures has been the problem of the identification of the speech act. Even given the limited overview in chapter 2, on first glance this might seem strange: of course we know where the speech act is—assuming there is such thing as a speech act. It’s in the words of the Scripture! But the question is actually bit more complicated than it may appear on the surface. A distinction can be made between speech acts which happen, first, within the narrative or the Sitz im Leben of the text, and second, those which occur in the recounting of the text. For instance, one author explores the speech acts of God in Ezekiel 37, observing that in this narrative, there are speech acts, but that they are just a “recorded and now static event.”¹ Many focus on the record of these “static” speech acts forever frozen in history, in what Kit Barker would call “speech act criticism.”² On the


² Kit Barker, Imprecation as Divine Discourse (Winona Lake, IL: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 17.
other side of this would be the recognition that even though, for instance, God’s speech acts in giving the sacrificial law are not continuing in their illocution at the moment, “believing that God still speaks through this text requires that he is understood to be performing at least one, if not many, illocutionary acts.” This distinction has implications for discussions of divine versus human authorship, inspiration, and a host of other related topics, but my purpose in the following section is to begin by exploring a few instances of “static” speech acts in the Old Testament with the goal of showing how the speech act, Maker, and perspectival triads shed light on our understanding of these words as doing something. Then I will push this brief exploration into the New Testament, and finally bring the whole thing full circle, suggesting ways in which the “static” illocutions are still used by God through the coming of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit in illocutions for the Church today.

The “Covenant Formula” in the OT Generally and Exodus 6:7 Particularly

For Reformed people, the term “covenant” gets a fair amount of mileage. We espouse “covenant” theology, baptize “covenant” children, speak about the “blessings of the covenant,” and routinely employ phrases like “covenant of works,” “covenant of grace,” and “covenant of redemption.” We like the word, yet all too often we have an incomplete definition of it. John Murray remarks that since even the beginning of the Reformation, a great many in the Church have had “the idea that a covenant is a compact or agreement

---


53
between two parties.” He says that it is often viewed as merely an agreement, a gentleman’s handshake, or a “pinky promise.” G. I. Williamson concurs with this assessment, adding his concern that this conception, when applied to the covenants between God and man, puts the two parties on equal footing and makes them equals, as if God and man have identical roles, responsibilities, and authority in the making and maintenance of the covenant. However, the Westminster Confession of Faith states the contrary very clearly:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he has been pleased to express by way of covenant. (WCF 7.1)

Because of the creator-creature distinction—the distance between God and man—we simply cannot be on equal footing when it comes to a covenant. Thus it must be far more than a mutual agreement. Murray is helpful, saying that even in covenants between humans the “mutual agreement” idea is lacking, for:

it is not the contractual terms that are in prominence so much as the solemn engagement of one person to another. . . . [I]t is the promise of unreserved fidelity, of whole-souled commitment that appears to constitute the essence of the covenant.

More than an agreement, it constitutes relationship and nearness. It entails “union and communion between God and his people in the bonds of mutual love and faithfulness.” It is

---


6 Ibid. Emphasis added.

7 Murray, *Covenant*, 10.

a “bond-in-blood sovereignly administered.” In the covenant of grace, God condescends and unites with his people in a blood-bought relationship. Michael Horton is undoubtedly correct when he writes that modern theologians have trouble with the concept of divine speech and action because they do not properly judge the relationship between God and the world.

“Consequently, theology swings between the poles of total creator-creature identification and ‘wholly other’ transcendence.” We turn now to see how our triads help clarify that God’s spoken covenants are the means by which he condescends to make himself covenantally known.

While much Reformed discussion about God’s covenants inevitably orbits the major dispensations of covenant grace, their initiation and administration, there is a far more central aspect to God’s covenants which typically gets comparatively less attention. This is what is called by many the “covenant formula”: namely, the phrase “I will be your God and you shall be my people,” along with its variations which will be discussed below. What I hope to show is that the covenant formula is, when used by God towards his people (or his people towards their God), more than just a bit of predictive information: it is itself a speech act by which God enters into a new sort of bond with his people. Because a full study of performative speech in the Old Testament could take volumes, I intend the covenant formula

---


11 Rolf Rendtorff, The Covenant Formula, trans. Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 3. John Frame and O. Palmer Robertson refer to it as the “Immanuel principle” in Frame, Doctrine of God, 97-99; and Robertson, Covenants, 46-52. While calling it the “Immanuel principle” hints at the important fact of the covenant theme of “God with us,” I prefer the clarity brought by the term “covenant formula,” and will refer to it as such.
to act metonymically; and I believe it can do so due to its centrality and importance to the covenants as a whole, which in turn are of central importance to the Scriptures as a whole.

In discussing the covenant formula, we should recognize that there may be any number of hints or reflections of it that use other terminology. However, for simplicity’s sake, those instances which follow the general formula and overt terminology are the ones in view. According to Rendtorff, there are at least two important connecting characteristics of these covenant formulae. One is the appearance of the Hebrew verb הָיָה (h-y-h, usually translated “to be”), and the second is that this verb is often followed by a “double ל.” In Hebrew, the preposition “to,” “towards,” or “for” is indicated by a prefixed lamedh (ל) at the beginning of a word. The very first appearance of the covenant formula illustrates these two characteristics nicely. In the giving of the sign of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17:7, God says to Abraham, “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” This italicized clause, to be God to you, is three words in Hebrew: לָהֳיוֹת לְךָ לְאָבוֹתךָ. We have the infinitive construct form of הָיָה (which itself has a ל-preposition), followed by two more words with ל-prepositions. The clause could be translated, more literally: “to be to you as God.” This same general format repeats in many other instances of the covenant formula.

One other point of interest when considering the appearance of the covenant formula is that it takes on variations in which only part of its full form appear. As mentioned, the full

---

12 See Rendtorff, *Covenant Formula*, 93-94, for a helpful list of these instances.

13 Ibid., 13.
form is: “I will be your God and you shall be my people.” Having just looked at the first appearance in Genesis 17, it is obvious that only the first half of the formula appeared there. In other words, the full form of the formula does not even appear until later in the Torah.

Rendtorff identifies three basic ways the formula can appear: “Formula A” is what we saw in Genesis 17, where only the first half (viz. “I will be your God”) appears; “Formula B” is where only the second half appears (“you shall be my people”; e.g. Dt. 4:20); and “Formula C” is the presence of both halves, the full formula. These three versions may be found throughout the Scriptures, and the appearance of any of these three variations of the formula should be considered enough information to indicate to us the presence of the larger idea of the covenant formula.¹⁴

The “central element of the blessing involved in covenant grace,” namely the union, communion, and relationship God’s people enjoy with him, is what we see expressed in the covenant formula.¹⁵ Now that we have some idea of the importance of this formula, we will look more closely at its second instance in the Old Testament, seeking an exegetical case that it is a divine speech act. This second instance of the covenant formula is found in Exodus 6:7, “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am

¹⁴ Rendtorff, Covenant Formula, 13. There are interesting patterns that emerge when noting where each of the three formats appear. Rendtorff points out that almost every instance Formula A is located in Genesis through Numbers, while Formula B does not appear there at all. But in Deuteronomy, it is the opposite: Formula B appears, while Formula A does not. Formula C appears twice in Genesis-Numbers, and twice in Deuteronomy. Rendtorff asserts that this is almost entirely due, following a source-critical assumption, to the “Priestly” source of Genesis-Numbers and the “Deuteronomist” source of Deuteronomy. I would suggest something much simpler: God as the initiator of the covenant is the major focus during the inauguration of the covenant. But as the times of (relative) innocence come to a close in Deuteronomy, and Israel is on the verge of inheriting the land (at which point they are expected to grow, mature, and demonstrate their own covenant faithfulness), the emphasis shifts to their being “his people.” This seems to me to far more naturally fit the redemptive historical trend, though below on page 69 I will suggest a more pertinent dimension.

¹⁵ Murray, Covenant, 4.
the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”

However, as one pitfall in speech act application to Scripture is in the rigid attempt to apply it at the sentential level,\textsuperscript{16} I want to build off of the surrounding context as well. Exodus 6:2-13 is often addressed by commentators as one unit, being as it is a pivotal discourse between God and Moses. However, we will look most closely at verses 2-9, which are most pertinent for our purposes. Verses 2-8 are the unbroken speech of God, and verse 9 is the response of Moses (and the people).

God’s speech begins in verse 2 saying, “I am the Lord”—literally, “I am Yahweh.” This is only the third time these words appear in the Bible, the first two being to Abraham and Jacob in Genesis 15:7 and 28:13 respectively, and each including reference to the promise of the land.\textsuperscript{17} The previous scarcity of these words is further underscored by the fact that they appear not only here in verse 2, but also \textit{three more times} in verses 6, 7, and 8. This should be a bold clue that something crucial is about to take place. Brevard Childs connects God’s words in this section to the complaint of Moses to God just two verses before in Exodus 5:23, that “you have not delivered your people at all.” Here in 6:2, God begins his response “not by justifying his action, but by a fresh revelation of the nature of the covenant God.”\textsuperscript{18} Here we should begin recalling that a central message of the Old Testament is that


“God is Lord.” God’s statement (four times over) that “I am Yahweh” is a bold underline to that fact, and indeed an illocutionary assertion, revealing himself to his people.\(^\text{19}\)

But verses 3-4 continue, introducing some slightly confusing information: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners.” God says that the patriarchs knew him as “God Almighty” (El Shaddai) but not as “Yahweh.” On first blush, this seems outright false: the name Yahweh was used multiple times before Exodus 6, including Genesis 15:7 and 28:13 as we saw. If God specifically said “I am Yahweh” to Abraham and Jacob, how is it that he can say they did not know him as Yahweh? There are a few lines of explanation to this seemingly problematic utterance. According to Jewish rabbinic tradition in the collection of Midrashim called “Tanhuma,” it is answered by paraphrasing God’s meaning thus: “I did not proclaim [my name] to them even if it was pronounced, but to you I have revealed it because you are going to redeem Israel.”\(^\text{20}\) Essentially, there is a difference between “proclaiming” the name of Yahweh and “pronouncing” it, and they may be on the right track here. It is not that God never “pronounced” (uttered) the name Yahweh before, but that the fulness of what Yahweh means was not yet revealed. William Propp quotes a similar paraphrase of God’s meaning: “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (in limited form) as El Shaddai (who makes covenantal promises). But I was not the object of (full) covenantal


knowledge to them as conveyed by my name Yahweh (who keeps covenantal promises).”

E. J. Young concurs: “[T]hey have not known the full significance, nor have they experienced the full significance, of the name Yahweh.” This again is a major hint to Moses (and the reader) that something major is coming.

Verse 5 continues the connection of this passage to the promises to the fathers by saying, “Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant.” We could do a separate study of the word “remember” (Heb. זכר) if time allowed, pointing out that God had also “remembered” Noah and all the inhabitants of the ark in Genesis 8:1, and that when he saw his bow in the sky he would “remember” his covenant with Noah (9:15). When God speaks of “remembering his covenant,” he does not mean he “forgot” in the human sense (as if the “noematic content” left his mind). Rather, he is indicating that he is about to do something about it. He is about to fulfill it. And so here (and Exodus 2:24), God is indicating that his coming actions are in fulfillment of his covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Verse 6 begins a new unit which is God’s direct dictation to Moses of what he is to say to the Israelites. Culminating in verse 8, this speech includes some noteworthy features. Here is its English translation: “Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from

---


slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.” The first word of the verse is “lakhen” (לָכֵן, “therefore”), which introduces Moses to the words he is supposed to speak. Interestingly, beginning a verse or statement with this word “frequently introduces a solemn declaration that has the force of an oath,” yet another hint that these words are more than the mere statement of propositions, or the expression of personal feelings, but in them God is entering into an oath formula. Similar to what we have already seen, Moses is to begin his speech to Israel on behalf of God by saying, “I am Yahweh,” bringing us face to face yet again with the proclamatory declaration (or illocution) of his name which is more than the simple pronouncement (locution) of it. Not only is God revealing himself as Yahweh to a single person (in this case Moses, like Abraham and Jacob before him), but for the first time God is revealing himself as Yahweh to all of Israel. This would clearly communicate to Israel that he is the Lord who is with them and who fulfills the promises given to their forefathers. This statement “identifies the speaker, but also affirms the ensuing promises.” The emerging consensus is that what God is saying here, at the very least, carries more weight than simple description. I have dropped hints, but will soon show how our triads illuminate this weight.

As we come into the heart of this passage, verse 7, where we meet the full covenant formula for the first time in the Scripture, I want to point out three interrelated observations

24 Nahum M. Sarna, Exodus (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 32. Sarna specifically cites the following passages as examples of this: Gen. 30:15; Num. 16:11; 20:12; Jdg. 10:13; 11:8; 1 Sam. 2:30; 28:2; 1 Kgs. 14:10; Jer. 5:2; Ez. 5:7; 20:27, 30.


26 Propp, Exodus, 270. Propp also suggests that the phrase “I am Yahweh” and the obviously promissory “as I [Yahweh] live” (cf. Num. 14:21) have basically the same meaning (271).
which help us to see the context more clearly. Observation #1: verses 6 and 7a list four verbs in close succession which place the onus squarely upon God to work his people’s redemption out of Egypt. He promises to bring, deliver, redeem, and take his people. According to some rabbinic tradition, these four verbs became the basis for the four cups of wine traditionally drunk at a Passover Seder.27 However, observation #2 is that though these four verbs lead up towards the covenant formula, they are not the only verbs in God’s speech through Moses. In fact, there are seven verbs attached to God, and linked together by their common vav-consecutive construction: “and I will bring out — and I will deliver — and I will redeem — and I will take — and I will be — and I will bring — and I will give.”28 The first three of these verbs relate to freedom from Egypt, the last two relate to the land promise, and the middle two, according to Cassuto, “establish the mutual relationship between the Lord and Israel.”29 Observation #3 is that God’s entire speech through Moses in verses 6-8 is a sort of chiasm, especially set apart by its verbs:

A) I am the Lord (v 6)
   B) Bringing out from burdens (v 6)
   C) Delivering from slavery (v 6)
   D) Redeeming with strong arm (v 6)
   E) Taking his people… (v 7)
      F) He will “be” his people’s God (v 7)
      E’) …that [they know] he is Lord (v 7)
   D’) Bringing out from Egypt (v 7)
   C’) Bringing into freedom/land (v 8)
   B’) Giving of land (v 8)

27 Sarna, Exodus, 32.
28 Cassuto, Exodus, 80. A vav-consecutive is a feature of Hebrew grammar in which the letter vav (י) —which typically indicates the word “and”—is prefixed to words in consecutive clauses, denoting actions or occurrences in close succession: “יִהְיֶהָם יִתְקַל…תִּבְדֵּל…רֹדֵד…וּלָכַח…” etc.
29 Ibid. Emphasis added. These verbs “establish,” i.e. do, something.
The collected force of these three related observations is that God is binding himself to rigorous action on behalf of his people, and that the central purpose and goal of all of his action is the establishment of a relationship of union and communion with his people.

We will look more closely now at the covenant formula itself in verse 7: “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God.” A more literal translation, which clearly shows the format we noted earlier from Genesis 17 (the verb הָיָה followed by two prefixed ל prepositions) is this: “And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be [הָיָה לָכֶם] to you [לֵא’הִים] as God [לֵא’הִים לָכֶם].”

Sarna makes some very important observations on this verse:

This declaration prefigures the covenant that is to be established at Sinai. The phraseology suggests the institution of marriage, a familiar biblical metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel. The first two verbs, ל-ק-ח, ‘to take,’ and ה-י-ה ל-, ‘to be (someone’s),’ are both used in connection with matrimony; the second is also characteristic covenant language. Similarly, the Hebrew term for a covenant, berit [found at the end of verse 5], is also used for the bond of marriage.

---

30 This is my formulation. As with most chiasms, each pair is not a perfect match, but I think this pretty closely fits. The verb in E’ is the action of the people, and D’ is a participial form, but all the other verbs are God’s activity.

31 Adapted from Cassuto, Exodus, 81.

32 Is. 50:1; 54:4-7; 62:4-5; Jer. 2:2; 3:1; Ez. 16; Hos. 2:4-20; and 3:1-5

33 The first, לָכֶם; Gen 4:19; 6:2; 11:29; etc. The second from לֵא’הִים לָכֶם; Lev. 21:3; Num. 30:7; Dt. 24:4; Jdg. 14:20; 15:2; 2 Sam. 12:10; Jer. 3:1; Ez. 16:8; and Hos. 3:3; cf. Ruth 1:12-13

34 He specifically has instances of the covenant formula in mind, but also other related variants such as Lev. 11:45; 20:26; 22:33; 25:38; 26:12, 25; Num. 15:41; Dt. 26:17-18; 27:9; 29:12; 2 Sam. 7:24; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 13:11; 24:7; 30:22, 25; 31:32; Ez. 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; and 37:23.

35 Sarna, Exodus, 32. cf. Ez. 16:8; Mal. 2:14; and Prov. 2:17.
So we have, on top of everything else, *marital language* here: a ritual including one of the most obvious examples of speech acts. Thus, there are seven relevant exegetical “hints” we have seen related to this passage, which drive us towards the performativity of God’s words here: 1) We have in verse 2 the first use of “I am Yahweh” since Genesis 15:7 and 28:13, where the land promise was made to Abraham and re-confirmed to Jacob. Here, it is in direct response to Moses’s complaint in 5:23 that God has not delivered his people at all, and these words are used *four times* in this passage (vv. 2-9). 2) We have the hint, via verses 3-4, that in declaring his name, Yahweh is not just *pronouncing* it but is *proclaiming* it. The fathers had heard the name Yahweh before, but in his use of it this time he tells Moses that he is speaking its true meaning. They will learn what his name means, *experientially.* 3) We have God’s statement that he has heard and “remembered” his covenant, in verse 5. All three of these “hints” explicitly tie this speech to impending *action* on the basis of the Abrahamic covenant. 4) We have verse 6 beginning with “therefore,” a typical introduction to oath language. 5) We have “I am Yahweh” spoken *to the people* for the first time. 6) We have seven verbs strung together, highlighting God’s activity in all of this. 7) We have the relationship of the verbs “taking” and “being” to marriage and covenant. All seven of these hints together build a solid foundation for exploring the covenant formula in verse 7, in particular, as a speech act.

In considering how the covenant formula in Exodus 6:7 functions as a speech act, Rendtorff offers a pointer in the right direction. Speaking of the first verb in verse 7, הָלְךַ (to

---

36 Austin specifically points to the “I do” of a wedding ceremony, though some challenge whether the “I do” actually that statement *in which* someone marries another. While it is not, properly speaking, it is still a speech act, and a necessary one. The minister’s words, “I now pronounce you man and wife” are the primary speech act, in which the marriage is constituted. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 5.
take), he writes, “It is certainly not by chance that this word appears at this precise point, where God addresses Israel as people for the first time; for it is only in the immediately preceding narratives that Israel has in fact become a people.” But how can he say that here God is addressing them as a people? Many commentators gloss right over this and assume that the people of Israel do not “become a people” until the covenant is fully and officially ratified at Sinai. C. F. Keil and Franz Delitsch are representative of this: “The adoption of Israel as the nation of God took place at Sinai (Ex. 19:5).” Similarly, John Durham writes that God’s revelation of his name in this passage is an “anticipation of the election of the Israelites to a new status as the people of God, soon to take place at Sinai.” R. Alan Cole rightly sees Exodus 6:7 as a clear statement of the mutuality of the relationship between God and his people, but points us forward to Exodus 19:5-6 and “the actual covenant-making between God and Israel.” If the actual, official adoption of Israel as a people happens in the covenant made at Sinai, we would seem to have no right to speak of God’s speech in Exodus 6:7 as speech “to his people,” for they are not properly his people yet. But as we will see, there is more happening in this verse than may initially be obvious.

While it is true that the Mosaic covenant is officially established in Exodus 19 and following—with its own set of speech acts, I would add—that does not mean that nothing happened here in chapter 6. Returning to the final assertion of Rendtorff quoted above, “it is

37 Rendtorff, Covenant Formula, 16.
only in the immediately preceding narratives that Israel has in fact become a people.” This would seem to be counter to the very real adoption of the people covenantally at Sinai. But aside from Genesis 32:32, which is an editorial remark by Moses rather than a statement of the peoplehood of Israel in the time of Jacob, the first mention of Israel as a people is Exodus 1, verses 7 and 9:

But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly. . . . And [Pharaoh] said to his people, ‘Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us.’

Rendtorff continues lucidly, “Consequently it is also with good reason that in God’s address to Abraham in Genesis 17 only Formula A about Yhwh’s being God should be used; whereas now the two-part formula follows, with which Yhwh ‘takes’ the ‘people’ of Israel to be his people.” Notice his subtle “with which,” indicating that in speaking the full covenant formula in Exodus 6:7 God takes the people. We will need to decide what exactly is being done here, and how. Rendtorff continues that the “normal” order of the covenant formula is reversed. Whereas, in its full appearance it typically begins with God’s declaration that he is their God, here it first states that he is taking them to be a people, and only then that he will to a God to them. The second part is spoken first, “for it is this which embodies the new thing that is now announced.” The new thing that is happening is their new status as a people, and even if the fullness comes in chapter 19, the relationship between God and Israel has fundamentally been altered in these opening chapters of Exodus. Analogically, when a man proposes marriage to a woman, the fullness of their covenant bond has not yet been realized.

41 These verses are by no means unique to the broader context either. Compare Ex. 1:12-13; 2:23, 25; 3:9-10, 13-15; 4:29, 31; 5:1, 14-15, and 19; as well as those uses in chapter 6 and beyond.
43 Ibid.
That fullness occurs in the later marriage ceremony. Yet, at the moment of the proposal’s acceptance, the relationship has changed. Logically speaking, prior to their becoming a people, it would have been nonsensical for God to refer to them as “my people.” And so, in this passage, the full covenant formula is the symbolic, topical, and even chiastic center of a “divine speech which gathers up a whole network of established theological utterances,” as we saw in the 7 hints above, all of which is “presented as the unfolding and continuing endorsement of the promise of the covenant given to Abraham.” In the conception of Israel at the time, the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could be seen as just that: a covenant with their fathers. But a major shift that occurs here is in that covenant becoming theirs, and not just their fathers.

In beginning to bring this discussion more fully into contact with our triads, I want to highlight the aspects of personal knowledge at work here. John Mackay writes that this personal knowledge of God, gained in the people’s coming experience of deliverance, “would no longer be a theoretical possibility as announced to them by Moses, but an overwhelming reality indelibly impressed upon their inner awareness that would shape and reshape their future living.” Indeed, God proclaiming his covenant name here is an act of

---

44 I am only drawing a parallel, not calling the Exodus 6:7 covenant formula an “engagement.” Douglas Stuart speaks similarly: “Only at Sinai, with its occasion of full ratification of the covenant, would God fully take Israel as his own people. The process began here, however, with their assent in faith to the promise that he would do so after having rescued them from Egyptian bondage.” Stuart, Exodus, 172.

45 Rendtorff, Covenant Formula, 21.

46 I should also point out that even though the language here in Exodus 6 is in the future tense (Heb. veqatal), this should not be read as excluding a present relationship with the people. The prophets use the covenant formula repeatedly in the same sort of future tense to people already in covenant with God (e.g., 24:7; 30:22; Ez 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23, 27; and Zech 8:8; etc.).

47 John L. Mackay, Exodus (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2001), 122.
self-revelation, in which he “does not merely inform Moses of his name,” but in which “he also makes known his essential character.”48 This being the case, any notion of this being a simple statement of a proposition, an expression of information, or an articulation of feelings and emotions, is challenged. When God says in verse 7, “and you shall know that I am the Lord your God,” the knowledge God’s people gain is not simply factual or noematic. “To know” in Hebrew (יִדְעָה) “is not essentially or even primarily rooted in the intellect and mental activity. Rather, it is more experiential and is embedded in the emotions, so that it may encompass such qualities as contact, intimacy, concern, relatedness, and mutuality.”49 Of course, this full knowledge will come for the people as they experience the redemption of the exodus. But all of this engages them with God in a close relationship of union and communion.

In Austinian terms, God’s speech in Exodus 6:6-8 which is centered on the covenant formula of verse 7 is a speech act. God gives his locution to Moses, who will in turn speak that locution to the people authoritatively on behalf of God. In this is also the proclamation of the certainty of the covenantal bond with Abraham being expanded and applied to all of Israel. In other words, a promise of relationship future is a change in relationship present. By this illocution—in the speaking of his name, and in using oath, marriage, and covenant language like “therefore,” “take,” “be,” and “know,” God has changed his relationship with his people, assuring them of special status.50 And yet, verse 9 tells us that the people “did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery.” As no specific command

48 Childs, Exodus, 114-115.
49 Sarna, Exodus, 5.
50 Stuart, Exodus, 171-172.
was issued in this speech, we must assume that the illocutionary intention was not immediately realized by a proper *perlocution* of the people. They did not respond in faith right away, and nevertheless their reaction was still a perlocutionary effect. Earlier I commented on the change in the appearances of Formula A and Formula B of the covenant formula between Genesis-Numbers and Deuteronomy, suggesting that the preponderance of Formula A (“I will be your God”) in Genesis-Numbers and Formula B (“You shall be my people”) in Deuteronomy was related to the change from God’s initiation of the covenant in the first four books to the people’s required response of faith and obedience in Deuteronomy. Adding to that, I would suggest that it is a change to an emphasis on the desired *perlocutionary effect* the covenant has on the people. But regardless of the immediate perlocution, initially not a “felicitous” one in Exodus 6:9, the “force” of a speech act is in its illocution, not its perlocution.\(^{51}\) God has accomplished what he intended to here in Exodus 6, but as time goes on, the exodus is complete, and the land is to be finally inherited, God’s ongoing acts in speaking the covenant formula again and again are further calling the people to the proper perlocutionary responses of faith and obedience.

In Sayersian terms, here in the utterance of the covenant formula, God’s creative Idea (the taking to himself of a people) is shown in its Energy (or Activity). God thinking to himself, “I would like to have my own people” is a nice thought, but without its being worked out in its Energy, it is just a thought. As an Idea, it necessarily will be realized by God’s action. And when this Idea contacts the people of Israel, it works on them in Power.

Sayers says pertinently, “When the writer’s Idea is revealed or incarnate by his Energy, then,

---

\(^{51}\) cf. Barker, *Imprecation*, 23-24; Austin, *Things With Words*, 109. We may properly speak of perlocutionary “acts,” but the “force” is only in the illocution.
and only then, can his Power work on the world.” That is, “a book has no influence till somebody can read it.”52 The covenantal relationship is not enacted between God and his people until he says so. Again, related to the analogy of an author, when we feel something to have been “written for us,” we come in contact with the author’s Power, “through the ink-and-paper body of his Energy,” and “are taken up into the eternal unity of [his] Idea.”53 The Energized Idea of the covenant formula Powerfully works on God’s people, sweeping them up into greater unity with his Mind, for as Childs says, “to know God’s name is to know his purpose for all mankind from the beginning to the end.”54 This purpose is clearly and actively revealed in Exodus 6.

In Framean terms, we have two triads to relate, and we can at this point do so succinctly. From the lordship triad, we can very quickly and easily see that God’s Control, Authority, and Presence are all bound up in the pronouncement of his covenant name, and in the statement of the covenant formula. As we saw, the foundational confession of faith in the Scripture is that God is the Lord, and he says just that here in this passage.55 “I will be your God” demonstrates God’s Authority over them; “you shall be my people” demonstrates his Control; and the two together demonstrate his Presence. Similarly, when looking at this perspectivally, we find the normative perspective in “I will be your God.” God is the one who sets their laws and commands. We find the situational perspective in “you shall be my people.” In every thought, word, and deed they are to act in accordance with this fact. And

---

53 Ibid., 122.
we find the existential perspective, again, in the two halves together as the full covenant formula. It is the answer to the “existential question” Israel might ask: who are we? The answer comes back, you are the people of your God.

Hints of the “Covenant Formula” in the NT

We could engage in the same sort of study, and even longer ones, in every Old Testament instance of the utterance of the covenant formula, every initiation and every renewal of the covenants, and many other places—not to mention the New Testament. Our discussion of Exodus 6:7 should be seen as just a small slice of the broader world of speech acts in Scripture. And so, without repeating what has just been said, this shorter section will be dedicated towards the indication that the New Testament is not fundamentally different. The same Lordship of God is everywhere proclaimed in the New Testament, and it is active. The revelation of Yahweh to Israel was not a once-and-done self-revelation of the Lord, but is ultimately shown in his greater self-revelatory act in the incarnation of Jesus Christ—the main character and primary subject of the New Testament. The Gospel of John very clearly indicates this continuity: “In this selfsame Christ God made himself known in his glory to Abraham (8:58), to Isaiah (12:41), to his disciples (1:14) as the true light of the world, bringing life through his name (20:31).”\(^{56}\) The same Lord is at work and is revealing himself in the New Testament. I will content myself for the time to list some examples of performative speech in the New Testament to show that something like speech act theory is at

\(^{56}\) Childs, *Exodus*, 120.
work in the presuppositions of the Scriptures. I will work in canonical order, and then end on
two more explicit hints of the covenant formula.

Beginning in Matthew, during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says the well-known
dictum, “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No.”’ (Mt. 5:37) This direction comes in the
context of a larger teaching about oaths. Regardless of the bigger questions about whether
Jesus truly intends to outlaw all oath making (which God himself makes, Gen. 26:3; Ps.
132:11; etc.), letting one’s “Yes” be “Yes” and “No” be “No” could be considered a speech
act. On the basis of the truthfulness of Christians following their Lord Jesus, when I ask a
brother or sister whether they will help with a church project, and they say “Yes,” they have
acted to enter into a bond by their simple, single-word speech act of agreement. In a similar
vein, Jesus later upholds the binding validity of oaths. Again, while not entering into the
larger question, we should notice how Jesus describes oaths a person makes. In Matthew 23,
Jesus is in the middle of pronouncing “woes” (another speech act in itself) on the Pharisees,
and he first says in verse 16, “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the
temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his
oath.”’ Their teaching is the inactivity of the words of an oath, and the activity of the item by
which someone swears. My statement of, “I swear to do thus-and-such” is meaningless and
unbinding unless paired with an oath “by the gold of the temple,” or some other arbitrary
thing (cf. the “gift that is on the altar,” v. 18). But Jesus tells them in verse 20, “So whoever
swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it,” and similarly for the altar and for
heaven. Any of these things, if sworn by, is effective for the “swearing by” of everything
within it. These oaths are effective, Jesus is saying, even beyond what these deceitful
Pharisees had thought. By playing tricks with their words, the Pharisees have underestimated the active power of their words.

The Gospel of John recounts the story of Jesus and the woman at the well in chapter 4. We might detect at least two levels of speech acts in his statement to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” (4:16) Not only was this a command by Jesus in which the woman became bound to obey him, but in it was the command for her to utter her own speech act to her “husband.” Her perlocutionary response included her own locution and illocution to her husband, and his perlocutionary response. In John 12:47-48, Jesus taught, “If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him,” but “the one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.” Jesus’s words, by being spoken (i.e., by being locuted), judge the people (i.e. illocute judgment), with the desired perlocutionary response being that the people receive Jesus.

The epistles of Paul do not divert from this, either. In a passage right at the opening of Paul’s first epistle, he says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Rom. 1:16) Readers, preachers, and Christians in general tend to focus on the “not ashamed” part, looking for encouragement in the midst of fear in sharing the gospel. But notice that the gospel is not just an Idea that lives in the mind! When it is preached, it is the Power of God for salvation. The locution of the gospel has illocutionary power. Similarly, in Romans 4:15, we learn that “the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.”

---

57 This passage has also been the subject of a bevy of discussions related to varying views of “reader response” hermeneutics. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, First Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 236-256.
When the authoritative law is given by God, it controls mankind in such a way that it is present with them, keeping them “in line,” lest they fall under the wrath of God. The normative law brings situational obedience or disobedience, the latter bringing existential judgment.58

The non-Pauline epistles point us in the same direction. Hebrews 4:12 contains another well-known passage, whose intimation of the speech act of God’s divine word is often overlooked. I have italicized the active verbs in the verse: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” The inescapable fact—whether this primarily refers to the second Person of the Trinity or to the Scriptures themselves—is that when God speaks, things happen. Verse 13 expands on this saying that creatures hearing his words are laid bare and stripped naked, devoid of all creaturely grounds for pride, fully exposed by the divine illocutions. Similarly, First John contains a series of “If we say” statements. For example, First John 1:6 says, “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.” Our locution of our fellowship with God illocutionarily binds us to walk in the light. The Idea of our faith, Energized by our “saying” it, does not attain its full Power when we walk in the darkness. Our “saying,” which throughout the epistle carries propositions such as “I have no sin,” “I have not sinned,” “I know him,” “I abide in him,” “I am in the light,” and “I love God,”59 truly places us in a new relationship to that thing. Saying “I have no sin” places us in

58 See also 1 Cor. 1:23, 15:56, and 2 Cor. 3:7-9 for similar concepts.

59 See further, 1 Jn. 1:8, 10; 2:4, 6, 9; 4:20.
the position of *abhorrence* and *spurning* of sin. Saying “I know God” places us in the position of living accordingly. These statements are not simple descriptions of our thoughts or emotions—though they carry these things: instead they are speech acts in which the speaker declares that God is his God, and that he is part of God’s people.60

But there are at least two more explicit ties to themes we have already noted. In Psalm 100:3, we read: “Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his.” This is a significant parallel to the covenant formula. The Lord (Yahweh) is our God, and we are his, the psalmist says, before adding “we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” God’s people as his sheep is a nice, pastoral image, but it is specifically paired here with the covenantal language of the covenant formula. And so when Jesus has compassion on the crowds, for they were like “sheep without a shepherd” (Mt. 9:36; Mk. 6:34), this is covenantal language of covenant remembrance, like that of Exodus 6:2-8. Similarly, in John 10, Jesus calls himself the “Good Shepherd,” whose “voice” and “call” is a speech act which brings his sheep out after him (vv. 1-5). When he says, “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (vv. 14-15), this again is covenantal language of union and communion, and the ones who are “his” are those who “listen” to his voice (v. 16). The voice of the Good Shepherd speaks an illocutionary message of “follow me,” with the perlocutionary effect of his sheep following him (1 Pt. 2:25).

In bringing this short survey to a close, however, and describing the second of the clearest hints of the covenant formula, I want to point to a couple more passages. In Hebrews 13:20 we have a benediction which describes how God “brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep.” First, we should note the “sheep” connection; but second, we notice that Jesus is called the “Lord” Jesus. This is significant, I submit, because Lord (Gk. κύριος) is used throughout the Septuagint to translate “Yahweh.” When we call Jesus the “Lord Jesus,” we are declaring him to be the Lord, Yahweh, the covenant God who remembers his promises and keeps them. Indeed, as another example, Matthew 21:42 quotes Psalm 118:22-23 saying, in reference to the coming rejection and death of Jesus, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” When the Son is rejected but set up as cornerstone by the Father, this is all the Lord’s doing: the doing of the κύριος in Greek, and the doing of יהוה in Hebrew. This is all the work of the covenant God. And so, when Paul tells us in Romans 10:9, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved,” we should notice that belief in the covenant Lord involves a speech act. Faith is accompanied by more than just organizing the molecules and nodes of our brain into the proper set of beliefs: by faith we locute, as God’s people back to him, “Jesus is Lord”: the same language God locuted to his people in Exodus 6:7 and elsewhere, saying “I am Yahweh.” Our speech act declaring the lordship of Christ has the illocutionary force of bringing us into the relationship of union and communion, the bond in blood covenant that our great Lord won for us. And moreover, when we call him Lord (or
Yahweh), we recognize that it is his “memorial name,” the name that not only reminds us who he is, but which—like the postdiluvian “bow” which was also a memorial for God (Gen. 9:15)—also reminds him of his covenant promises and the forgiveness that is ours in Christ. In a sense, our proclamation that “Jesus is Lord” is our perlocutionary response to God’s mighty acts in Christ, and our illocutionary action of entrance into the forgiveness proffered, which is in turn calling for God’s continued perlocutionary response of sanctification.

The Analogy of the “Covenant Formula” in the OT as Applied to NT Preaching

In concluding this section, I will briefly seek to bring this discussion of biblical data back around to the beginning, suggesting ways in which the “static” illocutions we have seen in the Scriptures are still used by God through the coming of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit in illocutions for the Church today. I have mostly engaged thus far in what I earlier described as “speech act criticism,” the practice of assessing the speech acts which are recorded in the Scriptures. But if the Scripture is still active for the Church today—if God’s words are his speech acts to us even now—the “static” illocutions examined above have not proven this on their own, though they have given us more hints.

In the Pastoral Epistles, Paul tells Timothy to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:1-2), saying that in so doing he will be able to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort.” These are clear speech acts. Indeed, Paul has been entrusted with the preaching of the word which manifests eternal life revealed to them (Tt. 1:2-3). In First Thessalonians, he says something perhaps

61 God tells Moses he is to say the name “Yahweh” to the sons of Israel, and then he says: "וזה שמו לשילה זו תבר ירא דך: “this [is] my name for eternity, and this [is] my remembrance/memorial from generation [to] generation.”
more astounding: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the
word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it
really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (2:13). The preaching from the
apostles was not just their words, but was the word of God. And the word of God was not just
noematic information, it was at work in those who heard. In other words, the apostolic
preaching was a set of speech acts. What they proclaimed was, “Jesus is Lord” (2 Cor. 4:5),
the covenant name of God. And when Jesus “reinstated” Peter in John 21 after his lapse, he
tells Peter to “feed my lambs” (v. 15), “tend my sheep” (v. 16), and “feed my sheep” (v. 17).
He is our God, and we are his people, the sheep of his hand. And God has entrusted this same
preached word—the apostolic word made more sure in the Scriptures (2 Pt. 1:19)—to the
Church, as it follows the lead of Peter and the other apostles to feed the sheep of God’s
pasture. Thus we find speech acts in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and we
find that the Scriptures are speech acts as they are preached and heard by God’s people.

Performative Speech in Church History

It would be false to claim that speech act theory has been around since the dawn of
time. This paper will not claim that it has been taught all throughout church history.
Nevertheless, some of the observations that led Austin to codify his triad have indeed been
around for a long time. A truly exhaustive study of these themes throughout church history
has not, to my knowledge, ever been tried, but would be a useful exercise. I only hope to
connect a few dots between older writings, and those discussed above, showing some of the
thought lines which fed into later applications of speech act theory, the Maker triad, and the covenantal triad.

Performative Speech in the Church Fathers

It should come as no surprise that one of the most influential fathers of the Church would feature prominently here. St. Augustine’s work has influenced most every corner of Christendom, and for good reason. His discussions in his books *On the Trinity* and *On Christian Doctrine* will make up the preponderance of my focus, as they both engage with Augustine’s conception of “words.” Wittgenstein critiques his view, saying that he sometimes mistakes parts for the whole, and calls it “over-simple.” Whether this is the case or not, Augustine’s work cannot be overlooked. While his approach in both works seems to me to tend significantly towards the “mental”—speech being the vehicle by which an idea moves from one person’s consciousness to another’s—he nevertheless makes comments that connect to performativity in speech, and even to the three triads at the center of this paper, and I will interact with some of these instances below. The argument here is not that Augustine taught speech act theory, but that this paper’s three triads belong to the same ecosystem as his thought.

Augustine makes a comment early on in *On the Trinity* which overlays our triads. In the context of the nature of angelic manifestations and messages to mankind, within the larger discussion of the appearances of members of the Trinity in the Old Testament, he says: “For the power of the will of God reaches through the spiritual creature even to visible and

---

sensible effects of the corporeal creature.” On its own, this would seem to closely align with a normative perspective (the will of God), an existential perspective (powerfully reaching into the spirit of the creature), and a situational perspective (having an outward effect on the physical). Additionally, it well illustrates God as the ideal Maker: the Idea (will of God) has its Energy in “reaching through the spiritual creature” in Power, such that it works visible and sensible effects. As an example of this, later he describes the effect Abraham’s obedience had on his own faith in Genesis 22. Augustine says that it was not a matter of God coming to know Abraham’s faith (as verse 12 might lead us to believe), but that it was God’s working by which Abraham came to know his faith. Abraham came to this knowledge:

After that mode of speech in which the effect is signified by the efficient,—as cold is said to be sluggish, because it makes men sluggish; so that He was therefore said to know, because He had made Abraham himself to know, who might well have not discerned the firmness of his own faith, had it not been proved by such a trial.

God’s will (that Abraham believe in him) was made known to Abraham through a situation (the call to sacrifice Isaac) which showed Abraham his own existential faith. Regardless of the rightness of this interpretation of Genesis 22, the perspectival triad fits nicely.

Similarly, in discussing the difficulty in expressing the unity of the Persons of the Trinity, when we have three different words for them which must be uttered in succession (not simultaneously), Augustine posits another triad, suggesting that each name given to one of the Persons is uttered by our memory, intellect, and will together. And just so, he says, “the

---


64 Ibid., 3.11.25.
Trinity together wrought both the voice of the Father, and the flesh of the Son, and the dove of the Holy Spirit, while each of these things is referred severally to each person.” As the memory, intellect, and will work together when we say, “Spirit,” so all the works of God are the working of Father, Son, and Spirit together. This is similar to what we have seen with all three triads. In each case, all three pieces must necessarily go together. Locution, illocution, and perlocution cannot be separated but assume the others, and so with Idea, Energy, and Power, as well as Control, Authority, and Presence. Augustine’s employment of such interwoven triads prepared the way for what we have seen above.

Later in the book, Augustine enters the world of “words.” Significantly, he speaks of words being “birthed”:

[W]e have the true knowledge of things, thence conceived, as it were as a word within us, and by speaking we beget it from within; nor by being born does it depart from us. And when we speak to others, we apply to the word, remaining within us, the ministry of the voice or of some bodily sign, that by some kind of sensible remembrance some similar thing may be wrought also in the mind of him that hears, —similar, I say, to that which does not depart from the mind of him that speaks. We do nothing, therefore, through the members of the body in our words and actions, by which the behavior of men is either approved or blamed, which we do not anticipate by a word uttered within ourselves. For no one willingly does anything, which he has not first said in his heart.

65 Augustine, Trinity, 4.21.30.

66 Later, he employs the same triad, saying that “If, then, any one have committed to memory the words of this faith in their sounds alone, not knowing what they mean, as they commonly who do not know Greek hold in memory Greek words, or similarly Latin ones, or those of any other language of which they are ignorant, has not he a sort of trinity in his mind? Because, first, those sounds of words are in his memory, even when he does not think thereupon; and next, the mental vision (acies) of his act of recollection is formed thence when he conceives of them; and next, the will of him who remembers and thinks unites both.” Augustine, Trinity. 13.20.26

67 Augustine also interacts with Hilary of Poitiers, who says, “Eternity is in the Father, form in the Image, use in the Gift.” Augustine, Trinity, 6.10.11. This is certainly part of the deep pool from which Sayers drew her terms.

68 Augustine, Trinity, 9.7.12.
Further explaining the notion of a word being “born,” he says:

Now a word is born, when, being thought out, it pleases us either to the effect of sinning, or to that of doing right. Therefore love, as it were a mean, conjoins our word and the mind from which it is conceived, and without any confusion binds itself as a third with them, in an incorporeal embrace.⁶⁹

For Augustine, exploring relationships of the Trinity, there is knowledge (a thought), word (the thought birthed), and love (the thing one does as a result, right or wrong). At first, this might not seem related to the speech act triad, for locution in speech is simply the act of making the phonetic sounds—hardly the “knowledge” or “thought” of Augustine! But if we look to Searle’s distinction between “the illocutionary act and the propositional content of an illocutionary act,”⁷⁰ or more specifically, the distinction between the “illocutionary act” and the “propositional act”—“that is, the act of expressing the proposition”⁷¹—we might see the connection more clearly. In between locution and illocution, Searle inserts the “propositional act” which is the content itself. And so for Augustine, one has a thought (which could be connected to locution along with Searle’s “propositional act”), then one speaks the thought in a word (like illocution), and finally love binds the two together by spurring a perlocutionary response. But we should also notice that despite Augustine’s framing his discussion in terms of a “thought” being “wrought in the mind,” that this selfsame thought passes through physical means. There are “bodily signs” which aid in remembrance. And not only that, if we

---


are to *do something* (Power), Augustine says we must first have anticipated it by a word “within ourselves” (Idea), which is set in motion by our love (Energy). Augustine is not authoring the Maker triad, but it comes from the same spring.

Getting a bit closer to perlocution in Augustine, he makes some comments which tie the thought of the mind (or heart) to the action.\textsuperscript{72} John 1:3 tells us of the Word, that “all things were made through him.” Here, Augustine says, “God is declared to have made the universe by His only-begotten Son, so there are no works of man that are not first spoken in his heart,” and thus, “a word is the beginning of every work.”\textsuperscript{73} Primarily, Augustine has in mind an individual who does some action out of the word spoken in his own heart. However, we could observe two things: 1) the speech act triad typically looks for a perlocutionary response of an *other*, but there is no reason that an individual could not perform a speech act in order to prod *himself* to a perlocutionary response in, say, a diet challenge or a workout regimen, and 2) given what we saw from Augustine above, my speaking a word (out of the knowledge in my mind) will ultimately enter the mind of the other. So if I and he have the proper “love” related to that thought, he will then respond, as it were, to my word which has now become his word, spoken in his heart. Expanding on this, Augustine says:

> [I]t is when the word is true, that then it is the beginning of a good work. And a word is true when it is begotten from the knowledge of working good works, so that there too may be preserved the “yea yea, nay nay;” in order that whatever is in that knowledge by which we are to live, may be also in the word by which we are to

\textsuperscript{72} We should keep in mind that the Power of the Maker triad relates here as well. Remember that Sayers is using the Maker’s mind as the model for the minds of all other sub-makers. Augustine does the same.

\textsuperscript{73} Augustine, *Trinity*, 15.11.20.
work, and whatever is not in the one may not be in the other. Otherwise such a word will be a lie, not truth; and what comes thence will be a sin, and not a good work.\footnote{Augustine, \textit{Trinity}, 15.11.20.}

For Augustine, we can do nothing good or ill, but from a word spoken. All actions begin as “words in the heart,” or Ideas, and work outwardly. Again, this is not so much an analysis of his “linguistic theory,” as much as an observation about how his account of communication finds similarity with our triads.

Many of these themes also appear in his shorter work, \textit{On Christian Doctrine}, where he repeats the idea that “words have obtained far and away the chief place as a means of indicating the thoughts of the mind.”\footnote{Augustine of Hippo, “On Christian Doctrine,” ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. F. Shaw, vol. 2, \textit{A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church}, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 2.3.4.} On the surface, this would again appear to place speech in the “descriptive” realm, where one’s speech is simply an explication of his own thoughts or emotions. But Augustine is far more nuanced than that. Those with good intellects, he says, do not just love words themselves, but love the truth which words convey. “For of what service is a golden key, if it cannot open what we want it to open? Or what objection is there to a wooden one if it can, seeing that to open what is shut is all we want?”\footnote{Ibid., 4.11.26.}

Words are described as “keys” which “open” something—a very performative description indeed.

This idea of words as “keys” is near the beginning of his section discussing the place and importance of rhetoric, which contains an immense amount of wisdom for preachers of
the Word. Cicero taught, Augustine says, that “an eloquent man must speak so as to teach, to
delight, and to persuade,” a triad of goals. He continues:

When, however, the truth taught is one that must be carried into practice, and that is
taught for the very purpose of being practiced, it is useless to be persuaded of the
truth of what is said, it is useless to be pleased with the manner in which it is said, if
it be not so learnt as to be practiced. The eloquent divine, then, when he is urging a
practical truth, must not only teach so as to give instruction, and please so as to keep
up the attention, but he must also sway the mind so as to subdue the will. For if a
man be not moved by the force of truth, though it is demonstrated to his own
confession, and clothed in beauty of style, nothing remains but to subdue him by the
power of eloquence.

In good rhetoric, the hearer is persuaded to do something. This rhetoric is forceful, it sways
the mind, and it is to be practiced. A Christian minister, then, is interested in his preaching to
engender righteousness amongst the people, and “should not despise any of those three
objects, either to teach, or to give pleasure, or to move, and should pray and strive, as we
have said above, to be heard with intelligence, with pleasure, and with ready compliance.”

Teaching, we might say, is the communication of the bare information, like the utterance of
the bare sounds in locution along with the propositional content. Giving delight is a bit like
illocution, as the preacher who has no pleasure in what he is saying does not often give the
hearer pleasure. But in his own illocutionary expression of delight, that same delight is
communicated to the hearer. And delight would certainly aid the hearer in his being moved to
perlocutionary action. For Augustine in this section, preaching the truth is more than a
statement of facts which pass from one mind to another—though it is that, too. It is the

77 Augustine, Christian Doctrine, 4.12.27
78 Ibid., 4.13.29. Emphasis added.
79 Ibid., 4.17.34.
preaching of a word which *does something* among the congregation, placing them in a relationship of either accepting or rejecting the message.

Three more examples will sum up the patristic period for our current purposes. St. John Chrysostom comments on Romans 10:9, saying, “The understanding must be strongly fixed in pious faith, and the tongue must herald forth by its confession the solid resolution of the mind.”\(^{80}\) This is not speech act theory, but we can nevertheless see hints of the mind’s Idea working out in its Energy by the tongue’s confession. Though perhaps the perlocution and Power goes unmentioned, hints of the first two pieces of the triad are there. St. Gregory of Nazianzen, in describing the relationship of the Son to the Father in the economy of the Trinity, says that “He is called the Word, because He is related to the Father as Word to Mind; not only on account of His passionless Generation, but also because of the Union, and of His declaratory function.”\(^{81}\) This may again be incomplete, but we see the common recognition among the fathers that the relationships among the Persons of the Trinity may be described by our common experience of knowing something and speaking it—something Sayers is keen to point out. Our thought works out into our word, as our locution plus propositional content work out towards our illocution, and our Ideas work out in Energy. Finally, St. Basil the Great comments on John 1:1, that our human words have “some similarity to the divine Word. For our word declares the whole conception of the mind; since what we conceive in the mind we bring out in word. Indeed our heart is as it were the source and the uttered word

---

\(^{80}\) Gerald Bray, ed., *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 266.

the stream that flows from there.”\textsuperscript{82} In words, thoughts come outward via our Energy, and though these do not complete the triads, they all inhabit a common space. Similarly, as this relates to preaching, a human preacher declares verbally the idea he had in his mind or the desires he had in his heart for his hearers. There is an organic connection between the two, and that being the case, there must also be an organic connection to the hearer’s response.

Performative Speech in the Reformation and Later Reformed

This section will be a bit shorter, but would also be profitably expanded into larger studies. I will similarly work through a few examples relating to the categories we have already seen. Given that we have much more preserved work from this period, I would expect that even more of the same could be found by persistent historians.

Though his life was chronologically pre-Reformation, John Wycliffe is certainly Reformational in his thinking. In his book \textit{The Trialogus}, he picks up on the same themes Augustine did in discussing the mind of man. Robert Vaughan summarizes, saying that Wycliffe views the mind of man “as consisting eminently in ‘memory, reason, and will;’ and these are not only regarded as a kind of trinity in man, but as a species of revelation in man concerning the Trinity in the Divine nature.”\textsuperscript{83} The triad of memory, reason, and will in our minds serve to show us the Triune nature of God, according to Wycliffe. But Wycliffe is of course best known for his hearty support of the Scriptures being translated into the

\textsuperscript{82} Joel C. Elowsky, ed., \textit{John 1-10} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 10.

vernacular. He vigorously defended himself against those Roman Catholics who attacked his opinions and his translating, saying that by attacking the vernacular translation as heresy, they were calling *God* a heretic: “Therefore it is all one to condemn the word of God in any language for heresy, and God for an heretic that spake the word; for he and his word is all one, and they may not be separated.”84 The Scriptures, for Wycliffe, are God’s powerful words which are active to salvation precisely because they are *his word*, which is to say, connected to God himself. Wycliffe said that “since it is the office of a preacher to show men their foul sins and pains therefore, and friars take this office, and do it not, they be cause of damnation of the people.”85 By false words, friars *damn* people, so we would infer that Wycliffe believed that the faithful preaching of true words would lead to *life*. Indeed, in the *Trialogus*, he suggests that a nation governed by godliness would be one in which “Christ’s word would run to and fro freely everywhere,” to the effect that “many more would wing their way to heaven.”86 Much more could be said about Wycliffe, but his willingness to put all on the line for the Scriptures, showed his belief that it is the *power* of God for salvation. The Scriptures are *active* and in them God speaks life and truth and brings salvation.

No doubt the writings and sermons of men like Martin Luther and John Calvin would turn up many such examples, but one example will suffice for the present. Like Augustine, quite often Calvin refers to the Scriptures in more “mental” terms, speaking of the “truths” contained “in” Scripture and less of the activity of God’s Word. And yet, in at least one place,

---

85 Ibid., 229-230.
86 Ibid., 175.
Calvin speaks meaningfully of the great *power of the Scriptures to affect you* (i.e., *do something* to you), more than any human writing:

Now this power which is peculiar to Scripture is clear from the fact that of human writings, however artfully polished, there is none capable of affecting us at all comparably. Read Demosthenes or Cicero; read Plato, Aristotle, and others of that tribe. They will, I admit, allure you, delight you, move you, enrapture you in wonderful measure. But betake yourself from them to this sacred reading. Then, in spite of yourself, so deeply will it affect you, so penetrate your heart, so fix itself in your very marrow, that, compared with its deep impression, such vigor as the orators and philosophers have will nearly vanish. Consequently, it is easy to see that the Sacred Scriptures, which so far surpass all gifts and graces of human endeavor, breathe something divine.  

God’s Word in the Scriptures is powerful, moving, and delightful—one of God’s speech acts. If Calvin is right that the Scriptures *work* in people, then ministers who preach these Scriptures are speaking on behalf of God, and their words on his behalf are likewise *working* in people.

Even though earlier I suggested that some see Charles Hodge as having an overly “objectivist” outlook when it comes to speech, nevertheless he fits snugly in the line moving from the Scriptures through Augustine, Wycliffe, Calvin, and beyond. “There is more of power,” he says, “to sanctify, to elevate, to strengthen and to cheer in the single word Jesus . . . than in all the utterances of men since the world began.”  

While he explains that the Word is not effectual unto salvation unless also attended by the Holy Spirit, this does not take away the speech act in the utterance of the powerful name of Jesus. This name is preached in

---


89 Something which, we might note, sounds a great deal like Vanhoozer’s suggestion that the Scriptures “become” God’s word perlocutionarily by the application of it to the salvation or the reprobation of the hearer.
the Gospel message first by the apostles, and next by the ministers of the Church, and this preached word is the power of God for salvation.

This idea runs through the whole New Testament. Christ commissioned his disciples to preach the gospel. He declared that to be the way in which men were to be saved. They accordingly went forth preaching everywhere.\footnote{Hodge, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 1:100.}

The Word of God preached and proclaimed in the earth is a speech act of God in which he commands a response, and empowers faith by his Spirit.

Herman Bavinck concurs, saying that the public preaching of the word “serves to work faith in those who do not have it, but much more to strengthen faith in the hearts and minds of believers assembled in public worship.”\footnote{Herman Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics}, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:449.} To put this in speech act terms, the locution of the Scriptures in public worship has illocutionary effect in that it works upon the hearts and minds of the hearers, creating the perlocutionary response of faith. This activity of the word of God in the Scriptures, which as we have seen occurs whether one responds in faith or not, is described thus by Bavinck: “The gospel therefore immediately takes possession of all human beings, binds it on their consciences, for the God who speaks in the gospel is none other than he who has made himself known to them in his law. Faith and repentance are therefore demanded of people in the name of God’s law.”\footnote{Ibid., 454. Emphasis added.} The central action of the covenant formula is, as we have seen, the enacting of a new relationship between God and his people. And here, Bavinck describes what the gospel does, namely, that it takes possession of people, which likewise enacts a new relationship. The powerful and active

---
word of the gospel, both in the Scriptures and in the preached word, truly works on God’s people, both binding them to their covenant God and requiring faithful response. Though these historical figures did not have the triadic language discussed here, their thought is given new color and clarity by these triadic explanations.
CHAPTER 4
EXISTENCE, PRESENCE, & POWER

We come now to the third major section, in which I wish to encourage a response. Having described the normative perspective (the “rules” associated with speech act theory and our other triads), followed by the situational perspective (where we watched speech act theory “at work” in the Scriptures and hinted at in writings from Church history), the locutionary and illocutionary acts respectively, I now wish to describe the existential perspective: the perlocutionary response this ought to call us to. The first major section “taught,” the second (hopefully) “delighted,” and this chapter ought to “move.” I have, to the best of my ability in a short space, given a set of triadic terms, and showed their meaning in the Scriptures, but I now must ask how this affects the life of the Church.

Ecclesiastical Declarative Authority: Misplaced?

Poythress states that “the genius of speech-act theory is to teach us to pay attention to the meaning that utterances receive through embedding in a larger context of human purposeful action.”¹ Indeed, one of the greatest contributions of speech act theory is in its acknowledgement and recognition of the “rule-governed” behavior of human discourse. If I

pick up a wooden rod and manage to strike a leather-clad ball in such a way that it flies over a fence, this in itself is not meaningful or profound. But in the rule-governed competition known variously as “America’s pastime” or “baseball,” it has profound meaning. If speaking human language “is performing acts according to constitutive rules,” then “the phenomenon of an utterance of mine counting as a request of mine is an institutional fact of the same sort as someone’s hitting a ball over a fence counting as a home run.” There must be rules governing the speech of the Church, the authority of her declarations, and varying opinions have been raised throughout Church history. For Romanists, the authority of ecclesiastical declarations is based on clericalism, the succession of ordained priests from hand to hand, passed down from Peter and the apostles. This is, perhaps we could say, an over-reliance on the normative perspective: the authority of the person of the priest who is declaring on behalf of God. Others base ecclesiastical declarative authority on personal and immediate “revelations” from the Holy Spirit. This is perhaps an over-reliance on the existential perspective: the authority of this special “word from the Lord” communicated directly in a prophecy, word of knowledge, tongue, vision, etc. Still others tend towards a denial of ecclesiastical declarative authority: there is “no creed but Christ” and perhaps there should not be any official leaders in the Church at all. The Scriptures are the only authority and preaching should be bordering on paraphrase of the Scriptures themselves. This is perhaps an over-reliance on the situational perspective: the control of God in the direct words spoken.

---


In suggesting these three potential over-reliances, I recognize that they are on the outer extremes. Most people and most churches are somewhere on the continuum between these extremes. Nonetheless, I believe that we all have our leanings—whether consciously or not—towards one of these three, and a bit of thinking can point us towards our particular emphases here. As I have shown in various ways throughout this paper, these triadic perspectives and approaches work together: each perspective entails the other. God’s Lordship means not only that he has authority; not only that he is in control; and not only that he is present. God’s Lordship means all three. Likewise, when we consider the authority to declare God’s word in the Church, I would suggest that it would be healthier to pursue a balance of all three perspectives. When God’s people enter a church for worship on the Lord’s day, there is a desire to know, as Wolterstorff asks: “[I]s it rationally acceptable to say, and mean it, that when sitting one morning in St. Mary’s church, or one evening in Oriel chapel, one heard something God had said—or something God was saying?” And if so, we want to know what makes it true.

Speech Act Theory and Preaching

The book of Hebrews begins by telling us that “long ago” God spoke by prophets (Heb. 1:1). However, “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (1:2), and it is his Son’s powerful word which “upholds the universe” (1:3). It is this powerful word of Christ which all Christians desire to know and to hear. But Hebrews also tells us that this word does

---

4 Wolterstorff, Divine Discourse, 18.
not just remain with Christ himself, but is also declared through his eyewitnesses. Hebrews 2:2-4 says,

For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Sam Chan writes, “Unless the readers were present at the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry, they would have heard the message of salvation through the proclamation of the gospel from the apostles and other Christians.”\(^5\) The same good news of salvation preached by Christ was also preached by the apostles, but this also carries the implication that “God speaks his ‘voice’ to the readers ‘today,’ through the human proclamation of the gospel.”\(^6\) As Hebrews continues, we find out that though Moses was the ideal prophet who spoke God’s words in the past (cf. 3:5), the word of Christ was even better (3:6). But yet again, that word is not just “in the past.” Hebrews 4 describes how those who heard Moses’s words still failed to enter God’s “rest” (4:1-3), and so it is even more important that we who hear the word today accept it that we may enter the rest which remains (4:6-10). “For,” the apostle says, “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (4:12). This same living and active word which was proclaimed by the apostles is proclaimed today for salvation, for we cannot hear without a preacher (Rom. 10:14).

---


\(^6\) Ibid.
If there is a connection between the natural observations of speech act theory and the act of preaching in the Christian church, then we should consider what it looks like. What would be the rules governing it? One of the basic observations of Searle is that action $X$ counts as $Y$ in context $C$. Within this simple framework, we could begin to assess preaching by saying that $X$=preaching and $Y$=God’s word. What is $C$? In what contexts, and under what “rule-governed” instantiation of “normative standing” have we met these qualifications?

It seems that there would be a few options. Context $C$ could perhaps be said to be that circumstance in which a certain set of qualifications are met. For instance, the person engaging in $X$ must be a man, lawfully called and ordained (1 Tim. 2:12; 4:14; Tt. 1:5-9; etc.). The time must be Sunday, the first day of the week (Mt. 28:1ff; 1 Cor. 16:2), in a duly called assembly of Believers (Acts 2:42-47). Or we could say the $C$ must be more based on content. The preached word in a sermon could only be equated with the verbatim reading of the inspired text (though this would raise other questions about the validity of translations). Or perhaps the sermon must be faithful to the inspired text to a certain degree, “contextualizing” or “translating” its “meaning” to the lives and experiences of the congregation. Of course, this would leave us with the question of “how faithful is faithful

---

7 I am not ruling out the effectual speaking of the word of God in the context of lay evangelistic encounters, family worship, or even the private, devotional reading of Scripture. However, my primary interest is in the institution of the Church, and what the preached word does to the corporate Body of Christ.


9 These two phrases are borrowed from Searle and Wolterstorff.

10 If we are focusing too much on one perspective, context $C$ could be, in the categories suggested earlier, an “authoritative” apostolic priest, the “situational” expository sort of preaching, or the “existential” charismatic revelatory approach. Of course, there may be others, but these seem to be three well-attested trajectories.
“What constitutes a sermon’s faithfulness to Scripture, such that it \( X \) can be counted as the word of God \( Y \)?

I propose a simple answer, based on speech act theory and the triads we have looked at, through the lens and use of the covenant formula. A sermon \( X \) typically works as the word of God \( Y \) in context \( C \): in which a duly ordained minister faithfully expounds the gospel message of the Scriptures that Jesus is Lord, that he is our God and we are his people. Obviously, there is a great deal of propositional content that may be included under this basic heading, referring to the cross, to substitution, to atonement, to christology, and so on. There are also many speech acts a minister may perform: “commanding, promising, encouraging, rebuking, and warning,” for instance.\(^{11}\) But the basic locution of a sermon is the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ (biblically and credally; cf. 1 Cor. 15:1-10), the illocutionary force of which is to bind the elect people in a covenantal relationship of union and communion by the grace of God.\(^{12}\) Even so, it does not only have illocutionary force for the elect. When we say “Jesus is Lord,” this can be the savor of life to those who are being saved, \textit{and} the savor of death to the reprobate. It can function as a command to put faith in his lordship, “an appeal to believe in Jesus, a prayer to the Lord Jesus, a promise to those who hope in Jesus, an encouragement to believers who suffer, a blessing to those who believe, a curse to those who disbelieve, a confession of faith, an assertion, and so on.”\(^{13}\) This speech act of the proclamation of Christ’s Lordship leaves all who hear it in the position in which they must

\(^{11}\) Chan, \textit{Preaching}, 140.

\(^{12}\) Though they have already been covenantally bound to the Lord in baptism and by faith, the Spirit’s work continues to renew this covenant and this relationship.

\(^{13}\) Chan, \textit{Preaching}, 200.
perlocutionarily either accept it in faith or reject it in unbelief: what it does not do is leave people neutral.

Triads and Preaching

The other triads relate similarly. The Maker triad is quite straightforward, as the delivery of a sermon could be very closely connected to writing a book. The Idea the preacher is to declare is the message of the Scriptures: simply, the Lordship of Christ, centrally seen in his dying on the cross and rising on the third day and ascending to enthronement 40 days later. The Energy is the minister’s act of speaking this Idea in intelligible words. And the Power is the hearing and application of this message to the hearts of those who hear. The perspectival triad works likewise. The content and message of Scripture is the normative perspective; it is the authoritative will of God. The preacher’s speaking of this message is the situational perspective; it is the proclamation of the control of God over all experiences and scenarios, declaring that Christ is the Lord over our lives and every situation of our lives. The acceptance of this message in faith is the existential perspective; it is the Christian’s recognition that by virtue of God’s covenant, he is present in the hearts and lives of believers, calling them to live accordingly.

Ecclesiastical Declarative Authority: Reclaimed

An overactive focus on the “mental information transmitted” in a sermon is a uniperspectival approach to preaching, to the authority of Scripture, and indeed to the nature of mankind created in the image of the Triune God. And even over-reliance on any one of the
three points of any of these triads can be detrimental. Vanhoozer laments that the collective trajectory of our era tends towards this perspective, and states that “our souls are undernourished; we are suffering from spiritual malnutrition, from image anemia: a deficiency of vital stories in the bloodstream of the imagination, resulting in weariness, depression and a culture of death.”

The imagination of a culture which has been affected by the philosophies of our age has been replaced by sloganeering and information, much of it false or misguided in its rejection of the Lordship of Christ. While I make no authoritative assessment of the extent to which this outlook has overtaken the American Church, I believe it is safe to say that it has, to varying degrees, in certain places. If the broader society around our churches is infected with such thinking—if, we might say, the “Green Book Problem” is still alive and well—the Church must not only be vigilant in avoiding such pitfalls, but she must actively seek to reclaim the power and performative activity of her declaration. In short, her ministers must not only view their preaching as authoritative in the clear explanation of truth and information—though they must do that—but they must also understand what they are doing in declaring Christ as Lord. Namely, they are speaking as “sub-covenanters,” speaking on behalf of God in declaring that he is their God and calling them to respond in faith as his people. Towards the climax of Hebrews, we learn that the Church, following her greater Moses, has come to a new and more glorious Sinai (Heb. 12:18-23), and specifically “to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant” (12:24). The Church, even two millennia after Christ’s earthly work, still comes to a new Sinai, and still comes to Jesus and his new covenant. And one of the primary means by which she does this is the preaching of his

---

14 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, First Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 36.
ministers, which is why Hebrews 13 picks this theme right up, saying “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (13:7).

As we have seen, this sort of thinking has a long history within the Christian thought, but some of the authors we previously considered also have important applications of all of this to our preaching. In 2 Corinthians 3:8, Paul calls the apostolic preaching the “ministry of the Spirit.” Even the “ministry of death” (that is, the Old Covenant) was so glorious that Moses’s face glowed, and so how much more glory would this “ministry of the Spirit” have? Calvin comments that thus “the Holy Spirit so inheres in His truth, which He expresses in Scripture, that only when its proper reverence and dignity are given to the Word does the Holy Spirit show forth His power.”15 This is a humbling prospect for a Christian minister, for first, it means that his speaking of the word of God is a vehicle by which the Holy Spirit works effectively, and second, it shows that as the Old Covenant glory led to Moses’s glowing, the greater glory of the New Covenant must lead to something. In other words, the glory of Spirit-empowered preaching does something to the Church. Indeed, “nothing is accomplished by preaching him if the Spirit, as our inner teacher, does not show our minds the way.”16 Humanly speaking, the Power of preaching is in its application to and reception by the human congregation. But on a larger level, the Power of preaching for the realization of its existential perlocutionary presence is—as Sayers would have it—the Holy Spirit.

---


16 Ibid., 2.2.20.
But lest we would separate the Holy Spirit from the Scriptures, we must recognize that, as Bavinck says, the word and the Holy Spirit “work in conjunction to apply the salvation of Christ to human beings.” The Scriptures are not an empty shell which rests cold and lifeless at certain times, and other times is attended by the Spirit. The Spirit is “a person who is always present with that word, always sustains it and makes it active, though not always in the same manner.” Bavinck continues:

Therefore, even though the word of God that is freely proclaimed by ministers or conveyed to people by way of personal admonition, public address, a book or other writing, is indeed taken from Scripture but not identical with Scripture, it is still a word from God, a word that comes to human beings but is originally from God, is spoken in power of the Holy Spirit and therefore always effective. The word of God is never separate from God, from Christ, from the Holy Spirit; it has no permanence in itself.

This is a clear statement that the preaching $X$ of a minister is the word of God $Y$ in context $C$ where he has done more than merely read the Scriptures verbatim. In declaring the Idea of Scripture, a Christian minister is speaking the word of God which is the Energy by which he creates, maintains, judges, kills, recreates, renews, and accomplishes his divine plans. And therefore, “through Christ the teaching of the law remains inviolable; by teaching, admonishing, reproving, and correcting, it forms us and prepares us for every good work.” Notice in this last statement the activity of this preaching (reproving, correcting, forming, and preparing—illocution) which leads to response (every good work—perlocution).

---


19 Ibid. Emphasis added.

20 Ibid., 4:458.

God works in preaching; God acts in our speaking: an extraordinary realization. God speaks to his people, not in some “inner word,” but in the “outward word” which beckons authoritatively for God’s people to “believe what they heard,” and “pray for the Holy Spirit to enable them to understand, receive, and obey what was thus externally made known to them.”\(^{22}\) God speaks to his people in an outward word which is truly his word, and in which “the preacher is the organ of announcing to the people.”\(^{23}\) The announcement of the thrice-holy, Triune God as Lord, with threefold authority, control, and presence—and the announcement of forgiveness and justification through him and the covenant relationship with him—is an utterance act with great power for the redemption and sanctification of the Church.

Suggestions for Further Ecclesiastical Application

The usefulness of speech act theory and triadic perspectival assessments is not limited to preaching in the Church. These areas are ones which, given time, would have naturally found their way substantially into the present study. I will present them as areas for further application of these principles, with just the slightest of explanation, in two categories.

Means of Grace and Christian Rites

The preaching of the word is usually reckoned by Reformed writers and confessions to be a means of grace. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 90, states: “That the


\(^{23}\) Ibid., 2:462.
Word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer, receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.”\textsuperscript{24} Through the word, salvation is made effectual, as we ultimately obey it. But so, too, are the sacraments considered means of grace. And as each is celebrated with \textit{words} on behalf of God, each involves speech acts.

In Christian baptism, we baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19). But we are also told that in baptism, something happens which unites us covenantally with our crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord. Baptism is “into his death” (Rom. 6:3-4) that we might have a “resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:5). Baptism is “into Christ” and into the “putting on” of Christ (Gal. 3:27). Baptism “raises” us with him (Col. 2:12).\textsuperscript{25} So if God by his Spirit uses baptism to do these things, what is the role of the pronunciation of the minister, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”? Crucially, we notice that here is a declaration of the name of God, which is not merely a description of him, but is itself a covenantal speech act carrying with it the divine promise to be our God and we his people. These words in the context of baptism have the illocutionary force (of course, only as attended by God’s Power in the Holy Spirit) of uniting the recipient covenantally with Christ. These words, stated otherwise, play a part in making it a \textit{baptism}. They are part of the parameters of this “rule-governed” event.

\textsuperscript{24} In Thomas Vincent, \textit{The Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly Explained and Proved from Scripture} (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 238.

\textsuperscript{25} I recognize that, perhaps to avoid the effectual implications of these verses, many Reformed and otherwise Evangelical Christians suggest that “baptism” in these verses means something other than the sacrament of water baptism. It is not my purpose to get into these discussions here, but while recognizing that they exist, my assumption is that these verses do indeed mean water baptism.
Similarly, in the Lord’s Supper, the minister “delivers to the people” what he “received from the Lord,” namely “that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me,’” (1 Cor. 11:23-24) and so forth with the cup. These so-called “words of institution” again make up the parameters of this “rule-governed” event, and in saying them, the minister declares, first, that what is happening here is not just breaking bread and drinking wine, but is the Lord’s Supper; and second, he declares the very words of Christ. These same words have the illocutionary force of declaring Christ’s redemption, his Lordship, and our covenant participation in his body and blood (1 Cor. 10:16; Jn. 6:54-58), binding us to respond. This response we do by eating and drinking, our perlocutionary act, communicating our faith.

Though not sacraments, Christian marriage as well as the absolution of sins act similarly to the sacraments and to preaching. In marriage, the Church finds a glorious type of the marriage of Christ to the Church (Eph. 5:32) and something in which God unites the parties into one flesh (Mt. 19:5-6). It is most natural to see this “uniting” happening in the speech act of the minister’s declaration, “I now pronounce you husband and wife; what God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” This statement is all the more performative as it calls God to witness in the covenantal joining of husband to wife, again hinting at the covenant formula: “I will be your God and you shall be my people.”

The minister does similar things when, in liturgical contexts, he declares “your sins are forgiven, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” and when he formally excommunicates an offender. Christ told his disciples that whatever they bound on earth
would be bound in heaven, and whatever they loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven (Mt. 16:19; 18:18), and that if they forgive the sins of any or withhold forgiveness from any, they are forgiven or forgiveness is withheld (Jn. 20:23). None of this means that the effectual power of these ecclesiastical speech acts is in the person of the minister. But rather that, like in preaching, God works through the authoritative declarations of his ministers, doing real things in their words.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

A Meaningful Church

C. S. Lewis closes the first chapter of *The Abolition of Man* by discussing the threefold constitution of man—traceable to Blaise Pascal and earlier to Plato—of head, chest, and guts. The head is “cerebral man,” the thinking or intellectual portion: the portion that knows things, understands facts, and grasps propositions. The guts are “visceral man,” the physical or “animal” portion: the portion that desires food, sex, or other basic things. But it is the chest—as Lewis would describe it, the “magnanimous, sentimental man”—which is the “indispensable liaison . . . between cerebral man and visceral man.”

In fact, Lewis says, “It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal.” It is, Lewis says, the man who has the head and the guts united by the rightly-ordered chest who is most human.

And yet Lewis’s authors, Gaius and Titius, and their *Green Book*, by their focus on the intellect (they call themselves “Intellectuals,” which Lewis says is a deficient title), on

---


2 Ibid.

3 “It is not excess of thought but defect of fertile and generous emotion that marks them out.” Ibid.
“debunking,” and on words as simply a description of feelings or thoughts—to the disdain of the visceral or animal—are really cutting out the chest. They are creating humans whose heads are loaded with “information” but who have no virtue. These authors of Lewis’s decry the lack of motivation, self-sacrifice, and innovation they see in the society around them, even as this same society is made up of “men without chests” who are really of their own making. The irony is not lost on Lewis. The program of these authors and their “Green Book” has removed the virtuous inclinations of man by making their words nothing but descriptions of inner feelings, leaving them as either “intellectual” or “animal” beings. And then these same authors express disgust and frustration for a lack of virtues in the society around them. Lewis incisively points out that they have cut out the very thing that causes good virtues, and then decried a lack of virtue, as if someone filled in the well with rocks and dirt, and then decried a lack of water.

The metanarrative of this study has been about more than teaching, or shall we say locution (chapter 2). It has been about more than building interest as we showed an idea in action, or shall we say illocution (chapter 3). It is both of these things, the normative and the situational; the head and the guts; the Idea and the Energy. But ultimately, this study would be incomplete were it not also about moving, or shall we say perlocution (chapter 4). It is the existential question of the “chest” which is the Power of the whole thing, as it calls for the response of faithful, covenant people.

If the Church wonders why her members are slow to obey all that Christ has commanded her, could it be that she has removed (or forgotten) an important part of her

---

4 The process by which writing is deconstructed by removing literary force and imagination, and insisting and resting on over-rigid literal definitions of words.
witness? Is it possible that she has focused too heavily on the head, the mental, or the “noematic” truth content, while neglecting the other parts? Is it possible that in sometimes divorcing “meaning” from application, she has left her members with deep existential questions about who they really are? I would suggest that the answer is, “Yes.” By separating all of these pieces, and forgetting some of them, we remove the organ while demanding the function. Or stated otherwise, if the preaching of the Church is limited to the realm of the intellectual, it should come as little surprise if Christians are not sufficiently aware of the call of the Gospel for the response of their whole person, rather than just the assent of their minds. Christians are to assent to intellectual, factual, propositional truths—they are to love the Lord their God with all of their mind (Lk. 10:27). But more than that, Christians are to be conformed to the image of the Son (Rom. 8:29), being transformed progressively from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:17-18). Indeed, they are to love the Lord their God with all of their mind, but just as importantly, with all of their heart, soul, and strength (Lk. 10:27).

Throughout this paper, I have sought a way to view speech—and specifically the speech of the Church in her preaching of the word of God—which preserves its true propositional content and the need to understand it abstractly with the mind, and which also connects it to its force to bind the hearer to a relationship of expectation and responsibility, leading ultimately to in-kind response. In Chapter 2, I laid out the philosophy of speech act theory, in which the force of speech is described in three aspects: locution, illocution, and perlocution. I laid out the analogy of the Maker as explained by Dorothy Sayers, in which she describes the activity of an author in three aspects: his Idea, the Energy (or Activity) by

---

which he sets his idea out, and the Power by which the work is read and the Idea known. I laid out the triperspectivalism of John Frame, which says that God’s lordship has three aspects: his authority, his control, and his presence. These aspects also make up three perspectives by which we are better enabled to understand his creation: the normative perspective, the situational perspective, and the existential perspective. As we saw, each of these triads overlay one another, and help us to see speech three-dimensionally. In speech, the speaker is locuting information and propositional content, but he is also illocuting a new status between himself and his hearer, such that the hearer acts perlocutionarily in response.

In Chapter 3, we saw how these triads may be seen at work in one of the primary speech acts of God in the Old Testament: the Covenant Formula. When God says, “I will be your God, and you will be my people,” he is not only giving information, but binding himself covenantally to his people, and requiring their faithful response. In particular, we looked at the words God commanded Moses to say to the people of Israel in Exodus 6:6-8, which centers on the Covenant Formula in verse 7. I noted that while the covenant was officially ratified when the people came out of Egypt and stood before the Lord at Mt. Sinai, God’s words in these verses were more than a description of what would happen, but that in them God entered into a new relational status with his people, as the God who would indeed save them and be their God. This new status also calls Moses and the people to respond in faith and obedience, which they begin to do as they obey the requirements of the Passover, and of leaving Egypt when God tells them it is time.

In Chapter 4, I brought these concepts to bear on the ministry of the preached word in the Church. I argued that in the Scriptures, God is expressing himself as covenant Lord, and
that by preaching this word, Christian ministers are declaring the very speech act of God to place his people under a new relational status of union and communion, by the grace of Jesus Christ. By hearing this declaration of God’s covenant word, Christians are likewise set apart and called to the response of faith and obedience. Thus the disconnect between the mental and the physical is effectively bridged by the recognition that there is a status change which is enacted along with the description of information.

If the ministers of the Church will reclaim the threefold nature of their preaching, we may be able to see greater growth in maturity as a covenant people. Ministers must recognize that they are locuting “information,” illocuting the divine covenant word of the Lord who is desirous of union and communion with his people, and calling for the perlocutionary response of his people in faith. Doing so, the living and active witness of the Church that Jesus is Lord will be far more meaningful. May the Church be the aroma of life to those being saved, as she speaks the speech acts of her Lord, in the power of the Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS


ARTICLES


115

