

Scripture as Language of Faith

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ABSTRACT: Given that finite humans must use words to express both gratitude for and description of the gospel we have received, we must ask how best to locate and utilize such words and phrases. The task comes with multiple challenges, including navigating the ambiguities involved with translation from ancient biblical languages and guarding against the misappropriation of those biblical terms for purposes foreign to God's intent. This paper intends to reassure believers and adjure church leaders that the scriptures are a reliable source for our language of praise and articulation of the gospel when any such language is consistent with God's overall purpose as shown through the history of Israel and the life Jesus lived for us.

Biblical Language, Theological Exegesis, and Translation Problems

In 1830, James Waddell Alexander created the most enduring English translation of the 13th century Latin hymn *Salve caput cruentatum*, one section of a seven-part poetic ode to the crucified Christ.¹ Alexander insightfully renders the beginning of the third stanza as “What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest friend?”² therewith acknowledging the inherent inadequacy of human speech for expressing not only the glory of God's presence and activity in the humble creation, especially in the mystery of Christ's saving work, but our gratitude for it as well. It echoes St. Paul's assertion in Romans 8 that “the Spirit intercedes for us with groans too deep for words,” a reminder that when speaking *about* transcendent things, or speaking to the God of the heavens, language has its limits.

1. *Salve Mundi Salutare*, often attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux, but more likely originating from Arnulf of Louvain (d. 1250).

2. A phrase which has come down to us via the interpretive German translation of Paul Gerhardt in his 1656 rendition of the *Salve* ... as the hymn “O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden,” regularly translated into English as “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” (e.g. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, hymn # 352).

How were the teachers, psalmists, and prophets of Ancient Israel and the first followers of Jesus to give adequate expression to what they had seen, heard and experienced? Furthermore, if it was a challenge for them, how then are we to presently speak a compelling account of the Christian faith into our own setting given the temporal, linguistic, and cultural distances from ancient believers? Nearly everything in our lives is different from those who had the inaugural experiences that gave rise to the faith we hold.

In truth, it is a question we must answer if the Christian faith is to be held at all, let alone transmitted to others, and today's churches face something of a crisis wherein many seem to have lost confidence in our original vocabulary of the Christian story and have gone looking for terms, concepts, and neologisms supposedly more suitable to the 21st century ear, whether they be corporate, therapeutic, aesthetic, political, or even religious. Alternatively, to note an equally troubling phenomenon, we see self-professed Christians in the 21st century populating more than ever the received vocabulary of faith with ideologies and stories that are sometimes quite foreign to the gospel's guiding focus, resulting in all manner of self-serving religious practices that call themselves "Christian" but often bespeak a very different story from the one inherited from the prophets and apostles. As a result, young people have recently been telling me that unless they are in a specifically Christian setting, they are hesitant to identify themselves as "Christian." This hesitation is not because they are fearful of being attacked for following the compassionate and life-giving Christ in defying the hegemonic impulses of a social framework that is on one side idolatrous and on the other side vulgar and libertine; it is because "Christian" has come in our faith-hostile time to mean something frightfully different from following the Christ of the Bible and the canonical confessions. The ones engaging in those distortions have justly earned that hostility, yet they believe they are being persecuted for the Christian faith. Christian vocabulary has been hijacked from every angle³ with the resulting damage being loss of faith in Christ and suspicion regarding His church.

Four observations regarding this challenge exist, and though they are not new ideas in general, they are rather important principles that deserve restatement:

1. The language of Scripture does and should provide the essential primary components for our articulation of the Christian faith, but the use of that language⁴ must be governed by its faithfulness to the gospel story of Israel's Jesus that gave rise to it.

3. This is the same experience that has been reported by Muslims in the United States for much longer.

4. *Usus* was a primary concern of the Reformers and is critical to the proper distinction between law and gospel which can deploy the same term, say, "the love of God," but use it to make a demand that accuses or a promise that freely gives. See Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian*, the section on "What the Word of God Is" and other places.

2. The language of Scripture in relation to the experience of gospel faith is not for providing a description for the uninterested or even for the seekers but so believers are equipped with an integrating and doxological resource for articulating what has happened and continues to happen to them and to all of God's people in response to the living God and His gospel. Only when we have a story in which the content both echoes the millennia of tradition, conveys its claim over us in the present day, and helps us make sense of all things does it then become a valid and valuable resource for presenting the gospel to others.⁵

3. One need not have settled on a fully developed theory of language to be able to speak about God or the gospel. Anyone who has occasion to be thankful to God for anything has a very present resource in the Scriptures of Israel and the Church. Anyone who has encountered the living Lord Jesus Christ in His people, His word, and His sacraments will find examples to follow in the two Testaments.

4. Nourishing the mind and the soul with the Bible's most important words and passages in light of its good news should be formally encouraged in our churches through private contemplation, communal reflection, pastoral teaching, and real-life participation in the church's mission. Doing so leads to a believer's ever-growing internal curiosity about the Scriptures as well as a greater impulse toward engagement with a hurting, discouraged and pessimistic world. Leading the faithful to learn and dwell on these and other implications of the strong vocabulary of faith avoids the creation of an insiders-only discourse, a "bible-speak," or even a "faith-speak" that does no good for the neighbor.

I will not necessarily treat these distinctly and in order because they work together, but by the conclusion, I hope to have illustrated the importance of all four. The goal is to stress the all-important connection of the Christian words we use to the overall story of God's saving purposes while at the same time reassuring the faithful that they should not hesitate to use the vocabulary of the Scriptures to express faith, even if they do not feel qualified to do so in every detail.

Faithfulness in the Reproduction of Biblical Language

The first part of assertion number one may seem self-evident but it is not by any means. Whatever terminology and phraseology we select to represent the Christian message to ourselves as well as to those outside the believing community, we must always remain closely tethered not only to the *vocabulary* of the Scriptures as the native language of faith but also to the *aim* or *purpose* of that language. Simply appropriating the words of the Bible without reference to God's entire intent for

5. This is an old concept, early articulated in Prosper of Aquitaine's *On the Authority of the Past Bishops of the Apostolic See Concerning the Grace of God and Free Will*, 8th chapter, then retained as the maxim *lex orandi lex credendi*, "the rule of what is prayed [matches] the rule of what is believed."

those who hear Scripture not only fails to guarantee the articulation of the gospel but carries with it profound risk. Like the man in Jesus's parable of the swept house (Matthew 12:45), if one adopts the Bible's terms and concepts only then to distort them in a direction away from God's overall determination to reconcile the beloved and fallen creation, demons come pouring in to seize the moment, and the latter condition is worse than the former.

This challenge gets exacerbated, oddly enough, by cultural overfamiliarity with our Christian jargon. If we may confine ourselves for a moment to Europe and North America, one would have to dig deep to find a term in the standard Christian confession that would be utterly unfamiliar to the average secular adult, if only because of repeated exposure. No one in the formerly Christian Western world would fail to recognize the name of Jesus, the idea of religion, or the term "amen." However, an invitation to those same adults to define the content of those terms and dozens of others like them in any fashion, let alone theologically, might very well be met with hesitation but more likely a mess of speculation, suspicion, and muddled content that will perpetuate a distorted understanding of Christianity. Therefore, it must be the task of the church and its members, the custodians of the gospel's claims, to know with some precision the content, contours, and boundaries of the key terms and the larger story that supplies their meaning.

Again, we could legitimately be accused of having stated the obvious just now, but why is this seemingly elementary task so difficult, even for some of the most saintly among us? Our proclamation of how God is active in the world is God's incarnate Word, none other than the historical man Jesus, about whom we have identifiable and compelling stories and well-crafted confessional identifiers, not to mention an endless number of hymns and reflective writings. Why is talking about Him and His gospel a challenge?

To begin with, the plain answer is also the correct one: the proclamation of the gospel about the Word of God and the stories that give that gospel substance must consist of words, and for the most part we are stuck with that. We cannot recreate the experiences of the Israelites crossing the sea or the women at the empty tomb. Even the Exodus generation of Israelites and those gathered on Easter evening needed words to make sense of what they had seen. For us today, our actions of counterintuitive love and gathering for a foretaste of heaven do communicate important truths,⁶ but eventually we will need to *talk* about them as well.

It is a short journey, then, to seeing the basic dilemma: language is imprecise. Even people who speak the same language can misunderstand each other. We see a word and say to ourselves, "I know what *that* means," but if that word has multiple usages for various contexts, we can never be sure which usage is intended unless we are fully immersed in the life, mind, and specific circumstance of the one who

6. These, to be sure, can convey a powerful story even without words!

used it.⁷ At least since ancient Greece, careful thinkers have known that spoken and written words are not “things” in themselves. Rather, words refer beyond themselves to something in the life of the body, the mind, or the world that has required identification. As such, a created word is meaningless to anyone else until the speaker explains it using already familiar words or exposes the hearer to the same experience. As long as we are confined to language in our expression of the good news we’ve experienced, some ambiguity must be risked because it is inevitable.⁸

This is not, however, the only or even primary problem involved with using words to talk about God in ways that will ensure continuity with ancient origins. To expand on the notion mentioned above, no one in all of time and space “owns” all of the words and phrases that Christians and their scriptures use nor does any governing authority protect anyone’s copyright on the content of the apostolic inheritance. “Christianity,” the belief system, does not comprise any one person’s or organization’s protectable intellectual property. For any random individual, terms like “Christian,” “faith,” or “God” can mean whatever that individual says they mean, and the only available counteraction is the persuasiveness of someone who can effectively argue otherwise.

When we begin to speak about “the language of Scripture,” we should soon realize that we must contend with several complicated historical realities. The first is we do not completely understand the language of classical Israel, or “Hebrew.”⁹ Although we possess significant understanding of all the really important terms and concepts of Israel’s Bible, there are as many as 20% of all the words in the ancient Hebrew language for which our translation into English ranges from ambiguous to completely conjectural.¹⁰ We can make well-informed proposals because we have ancient Greek, Latin, and other translations with words we *do* understand, and we can only hope that those long-gone translators were careful in their work. In the end, however, we are forced to hold any firm conclusions we have in abeyance,

7. This is why Hebrew and Greek lexicons, improperly understood, can be deceptive. They are catalogs of usage, not linguistic equivalence.

8. See the opening of Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*. This also brings to mind Wittgenstein’s “language games” wherein linguistic meaning is basically formed on-the-fly, only in the association of a spoken or written something with all the multi-dimensional interactive features that surround any given articulation.

9. Two interesting details ought to be noted here. Properly, one should refer to Hebrew as a set or a series of ancient languages rather than one unified system. The composition of the Hebrew Bible likely spans a stunning one thousand years, so no one should be surprised to learn that it is possible to distinguish various stages of the language. Having said that, it is equally stunning that the language could remain so consistent, relatively speaking. It is not unlikely that the Israelites of the first temple period would have been able to read the writings of the monks of Qumran a thousand years later.

10. In a typical edition of the NRSV, for example, one needs simply to go through the Old Testament and note the number of times when a footnote says, “Meaning of Hebrew uncertain.”

realizing that while we must trust that the Spirit is making these things as clear as possible to us, nuance and the aforementioned cultural distance prevent us from diving headlong into certainty.

In my work of teaching biblical languages to students, I always emphasize that the goal of translation is to make a text intelligible for a community of hearers or readers. Therefore, every act of translation is a work of interpretation and often an approximate one at that. We may be able to get our minds wrapped around an ancient word and its range of uses, but we are often unable to identify a modern English word that serves as an exact equivalent of that ancient word in all its various uses. We must settle in many cases for a term that provides the maximum amount of overlap in use with the result that the same Hebrew or Greek term might be translated in very different ways depending on where and how it appears in the original. Furthermore, there will always be limitations in the so-called “target language” beyond discreet words: syntax, structure, idiom, and so on.

Here, though, is a first essential point: this uncertainty should by no means cast doubt on the general reliability of the English Bibles we all use or shake our confidence in employing our biblical faith vocabulary. In focused church-based Bible studies led by an educated pastor, parishioners will hear their teachers note some of those ambiguities in play when one renders Greek and Hebrew into English and worry that they should not be trying to read their Bibles at all without knowing about these issues. These faithful students should not worry. Although translators employ various methods, theological views, and linguistic prejudices in executing their work, not a single major translation has ever been done by people or teams who did not bring expertise to the task or who did not hope for the absolutely most accurate translation possible for the particular audience who would receive it. This goes for the legendary seventy-two in ancient Alexandria through Theodotion and Jerome down through Wycliffe and Luther and into the present day.¹¹

Fluctuating Language in Historical Transitions and in Cultural Dynamisms

For the first disciples, the crucifixion and resurrection of their beloved rabbi left them with a wholly new situation, a language vacuum. Of course, they knew the contents of their own law, prophets, and writings, but when Jesus fulfilled *none* of the messianic roles they and their contemporaries expected (a divine priest restoring pure temple worship, a new David riding in to rout the Romans before them, a

11. I would be remiss if I did not nuance this statement somewhat. This does not mean that all translations are simply interchangeable. Students of the Bible are well-served if they are informed about how translations range from paraphrase to hyper-literal, and that some are smoothed for public reading while others are left more wooden for detailed study or that some traditions and sects have their own idiosyncratic translations.

leader of angelic armies bringing judgment to the earth, etc.) but instead appeared to have been abandoned or even cursed by God,¹² they clearly did not know what to think or say, if we presume that the gospels, Acts, and snippets of proto-church life in Paul's letters are any indication.¹³ This public humiliation of the Jewish God by the Romans had no precedent, or so they thought, in the faith constructs of their ancestors. In other words, they faced the same problem in their own way as we face in reading and translating their accounts—"what language shall I borrow?"

What they did have was the Scriptures of Israel, what Christians later came to call The Old Testament; this was their "Bible," even if those writings had not quite yet been formally defined as a canon. In light of what they had experienced, and especially, as the crucifixion and resurrection narratives portray, as things came to mind that Jesus had said and done, they connected passages from their knowledge of Israel's scriptures to the extraordinary story they had lived with Jesus. Perhaps this Jesus had not brought about the literal realization of Psalm 110 where enemies (the Romans) were reduced to slave attendants, but what about Isaiah 53 wherein the suffering servant, the friend of transgressors, makes the effective intercession? Over and over again, Christians discovered in the writings before them a language for faith that not only linked them with their ancestors but also clarified and resonated with the puzzling mode by which Jesus of Nazareth lived out his messiahship.

The first followers of Jesus during his ministry were exclusively Jews from *eretz-yisrael*, mostly from Galilee, who would thereby have almost certainly been functionally literate in at least three languages: some version of Hebrew, its sister language Aramaic, and koine Greek, if not others, perhaps Latin.¹⁴ Debate regarding this has swirled in many directions over the last several generations of scholarship, but this seems to be the current settlement that most scholars are at least willing to teach their students and place in textbooks. That someone without years of formal education could easily and confidently converse beyond the language of their childhood family may seem like a hard sell to Americans, but it is obvious to many if not most people beyond American borders who must contend with English as the world's *lingua franca*. Any street vendor in Mexico City, Rome, or Shanghai would soon be out of business without the ability to communicate with people who have the money but do not know the local language. An American missionary who lived and served in a multi-lingual context once told me, "I have to be able to work in at least four languages. Otherwise I won't know what they're saying when people

12. Which St. Paul makes clear in Galatians 3:1, 13. Cf. Deut. 21:23, Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34.

13. Mark 16:8 should not be overlooked here! "...they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."

14. Even though not everyone would have been equally multilingual. See the work of Hughson Ong, *The Multilingual Jesus and the Sociolinguistic World of the New Testament with Special Reference to the Gospel of Matthew* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. xii + 422. See also Bruce D. Chilton, *Aramaic Jesus: Tradition, Identity, and Christianity's Mother Tongue* (Baylor, 2025), *passim*.

talk about me.” What language was Jesus using when he delivered the Sermon on the Mount? Who knows? Essentially, it doesn’t matter because the truths he was promulgating were received quickly and naturally by those who were already thinking in multi-linguistic terms.

Historians of the age have routinely, and possibly carelessly and dismissively, described Jesus’s early followers as undoubtedly “illiterate.” That claim could only be accurate in its plain sense if one adopts a modern and privileged definition of “literacy.” Two points must be made: the first is that so-called “working-class illiterate fishermen” would be unable to function in their Galilean business context without being able to conduct business in multiple languages. The fishing and olive oil enterprise in early first century Galilee had moved far beyond a subsistence economy. Fresh-water fish from the Tiberian Lake were a Roman delicacy, so the demand likely contributed to the construction of an imperial city on its western shore. The imperial highway ran through the center of Capernaum, and Magdala boasted one of the most active fish processing and export concerns in the region. To imagine that the fishermen of the call stories in all four gospels were not fully competent in multi-lingual transactions is to vastly misunderstand the culture of first-century Galilee. As business perpetually depends on the practice of relationship-building, the fishermen among Jesus’s disciples should likely be considered street-level sophisticates, quickly able to associate words and intentions when their clients from distant lands would have stories to tell or claim that some discount was due them. Receipts and manifests preserved on pottery shards and other materials from Phoenician times show that business people displayed a working if rudimentary knowledge of the alphabets of the languages they had to use. A basic ability to convey even complicated ideas could be done by someone with only an elementary familiarity with the written form of a language.¹⁵ For this reason, we can safely imagine that in the international business setting of Galilee, multilingual conversation was normal. We should view the disciples as linguistically curious and fully capable of understanding and experimenting with ways of putting experiences into words.¹⁶

The second point to be made is that literacy scholars have long noted that people who cannot read and write are by no means excluded from “literature,” that is, the opportunity to participate in literacy by listening and repeating stories that come their way, even full-length works of Greek masters. There is evidence

15. As an example, look no further than the gospel of John, which one Johannine scholar described as “kid Greek” when compared with Luke or Hebrews or the Pauline compilations Ephesians and Colossians. Yet John has been regarded for ages as the gospel with the most spiritual depth.

16. To repeat the caveat in note 13 above, not everyone would have had equal facility in these various languages, but they would all have been part of that multilingual culture. Among Jesus’ disciples, we also acknowledge beyond the fishing industry the equivalent of today’s border control (Matthew the tax-collector), Dikapolis businessmen (Philip) and accountants (Judas of Ishkariot), for which multilinguality would be assumed.

for “circles of readers” wherein one person in the group was able to read from a literary text so that others could follow along and even expand their respective vocabularies without necessarily having to have scribal skills. One thinks of “the reader” (ὁ ἀναγινώσκων, *ho anaginōskōn*) who is parenthetically addressed in Mark 13:14 and Matthew 24:15. Could this be an imbedded instruction to the group reader to make sure a certain pronunciation or tone is correct so that the hearers in the circle get the correct idea?

What all of this means is that the disciples could have easily decided that their wholly disruptive encounter with Jesus required entirely new words or was impossible to communicate at all.¹⁷ However, when the standard passages and promises they already knew did not finally seem to be equal to the experience, they did not toss the scrolls away but read all the more broadly and discovered other passages that closed the loop. The richness of the Bible’s vocabulary in its account of God’s activity in ancient Israel was available to those who were charged with crafting some sort of narrative about the ministry of Jesus, and they found it suitable enough to employ it in repeating the story they had to tell. Furthermore, they found that they could do so in more than one language.¹⁸

Ultimately, the Scriptures of Israel and the Church spring from a highly motivated desire to find the right language for their experiences and should therefore become the primary source for bringing those individual and communal encounters with the divine into our own time and experience, even if the entire narrative and its vocabulary must be recontextualized. When we translate those terms into our modern languages, we may find them to be insufficient for expressing the full majesty for which they aim, but so were the originals. Nevertheless, both cases point readers and hearers in the direction of understanding God and His activity. The apostles and even the earliest interpreters did not (with a few important exceptions)¹⁹ make up completely new words for the phenomena they witnessed. All of the language they employed was “borrowed.”

In the second half of the first point, the use of the language we have received must be tested by its faithfulness to the gospel story of Israel’s Jesus that gave

17. We might be reminded of Paul’s note in II Cor. 12:4, where the experience of Paradise was so indescribable that even trying to do so would divest it of its force. Furthermore, the phenomenon of glossolalia (Acts 10 and 19, I Cor. 14:18) signals the realization among the apostles that only the language of the angels could satisfy the doxological impulse of those overcome by the good news of Jesus.

18. Contrast Islam, whose holy book is believed to be pure dictation, so precise that any “translation” from Arabic can only be called an “interpretation.”

19. A good example is ἐπιούσιον (*epiousion*) from the Lord’s prayer (Matt. 6 and Luke 11) which we translate “daily,” but is found nowhere else in all of Greek literature unless the writer is discussing the Lord’s Prayer, which means that all we have to go on is the tradition, including translations. It could easily mean “for the [coming] day,” which would create a clearer connection to, say, the manna in the wilderness story.

rise to it. Where does one even begin to describe the unholy wreckage that has resulted over the centuries by Christians, let alone the church's opponents, misappropriating scriptural stories and terms for self-glorifying ends or the purposes of one-or-another antichrist?

This dynamic of terminological fraud has been with us from the beginning. In Genesis 3, the serpent's interrogation of the woman was an attempt to redirect the meaning of God's phrase "you shall surely die" to its opposite, you will truly live as gods.²⁰ Abandoning God's assurance that avoiding the tree of knowledge would ensure fruitful multiplication of both creation and humankind, a story rich with hope and purpose, the woman and man adopt instead the serpent's redefinition of "life" as the static notion of knowledge or, perhaps better, "information." All sense of purpose beyond the self is lost, and what follows, usually overshadowed by interpreters' penchants for making depth of shame the major point,²¹ should likely instead be seen as an almost comical moment where the first thing their newly-acquired "information" shows them is their nakedness, hardly an insight that rises to the level of "smart as God," as the serpent had promised. This quint-essential cautionary tale to end all cautionary tales illustrates what happens when language and vocabulary of faith are isolated from the greater story of which they are supposed to be a part. "Live," "die," and "know" are thoroughly jumbled in the serpent's rhetoric when removed from God's clear command and the destiny God had envisioned for humankind and the creation.

For a parallel example, we find in earlier Christianity the mirror opposite of the Genesis 3 conversation in Jesus's dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3,²² a story that could not possibly have been simply a set-up for the punch lines of verses 16 and 17 but surely must have been preserved to record the experience of ambiguity that ensues in Christian vocabulary when separated from its saving narrative. Jesus says that one must be born "anew" (Gk. *ἀνωθεν*, *anōthen*), which Nicodemus hears as "again," but Jesus intends to mean "from above." When Nicodemus expresses puzzlement, there is no terminological explanation from Jesus but an invitation into the activity of God's Spirit. Furthermore, as if to teach us how integral as well as how challenging this can be, there is no epilogue to this incident wherein we hear Nicodemus say, "Ah—I get it now." We only know that he potentially started

20. Space prohibits us from noting how stunning this incident is from the standpoint of how one interprets the "Word of God." We have made it barely three chapters into the Bible when there is a debate about the real meaning of something God has said. Some interpreters have said that this passage only works if the reader sidesteps the traditional association of the serpent with the Satan of the New Testament and gravitates more toward the Satan of Job as a kind of quality-control character, which would make this really about a test exercise gone horribly wrong.

21. Presumably because of the need to read 3:7 solely in light of 2:25.

22. As some have noted but very few have absorbed, the opening chapters of John map astonishingly onto the opening chapters of Genesis when read through rabbinic eyes. See Bruce E. Schein, *Following the Way: The Geography of John's Gospel*.

to catch on by his subsequent appearances in John 7 and 19. Once again, we have vocabulary to get the job done, but that must be developed in story and experience form in order to take on any persuasive force with the hearer.²³

We may look also at Acts 1 where Luke punctures the celebratory balloon of the Ascension with a question from the disciples who, after all that they had seen and heard, *still* ask “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” One might well have expected John 11:35, “Jesus wept,” to have appeared here rather than in the Lazarus story. Whether he may have been responding through tears or not, Jesus’s answer does not consist of redefining “kingdom” for his hearers but describing what will soon happen to them—the endowment of power from the Spirit and their global mission of witness. The term finds its meaning in a narrative promise.

We are already beginning to see a pattern of ambiguously understood language in these three examples from the scriptures. Terms and phrases, even if lifted directly from the Bible in the original language as readers of every age have been wont to do, cannot stand on their own but acquire the ability to convey accurate meaning only when they are attached to the particular claim or experience that God’s prophets and His Messiah have enacted and revealed.

This might be a good point to note that the word “context” has become rather profligate in its modern and post-modern usage by those contending that they are providing a more accurate account or critique of the meaning of a particular word or phrase than someone else is. If someone wants to lodge an objection to another person’s interpretation of a word or passage on any subject, including the Bible, the claim that it is being “taken out of context” has become a favorite rebuttal. To be sure, decontextualized quotes, weaponized as propaganda, are the bane of church teachers’ existences. “Context” is not, however, the idea we are aiming for here.²⁴ The important concept we must identify is *intent*. Classical Christian interpreters used the word σκοπός (*skopos*, “aim” or “intent” or “main point”) to refer to the overall message a passage intended to convey. They would identify the center of gravity, so to speak, of the passage so that each phrase and term in the pericope would necessarily be read in light of its overall purpose.²⁵ This proved to be a keystone move in the goal of keeping scriptural interpretation within the purview of its founding purposes.

23. This is not to exclude another major parallel story, Jesus’ testing in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13), where much the same attempt is made to wrest the connection of terms and phrases from their defining stories.

24. Nor does simply going back and reading the surrounding verses, the supposed “context,” necessarily conclude any debate.

25. *Skopos* (σκοπός) is a term Christian writers inherited from Greek philosophers and orators. Aristotle, for example, used *skopos* and *telos* to distinguish between the ideas of “target” and “outcome.” Among Christian orators, John Chrysostom wrote, ἄνευ τῆς εὐρέσεως τοῦ σκοποῦ οὐκ ὠφελεῖ ἡ γραφή (exp. in Ps.3 [5.2a]) – “scripture is of no use unless one finds the point.” The terms “aim” or “main point” are preferable translations rather than “scope” which in modern usage carries a different connotation.

The Development and Justification of Christian Scholarship

Once Christianity moved beyond the apostolic era and into its next phase when the primary opponents were no longer Greek mythological religions and rivalry from growth of the synagogue movement after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD,²⁶ its leaders found themselves having to contend with fugitive visionaries determined to transform the very words, teachings, and actions of Jesus into another generic mystery cult of the Mediterranean basin. The first grand example was Gnosticism.²⁷ Gnosticism was a particularly challenging counterpoint to Christianity precisely because the movement utilized so much vocabulary also common to apostolic Christianity. The parade example of how things could be misread or even fully taken over by a completely non-Christian aim is the Gospel of John, enthusiastically received by Gnostic teachers such as Valentinus (d. 160). They were thrilled at how nicely the basic framework of Gnosticism mapped so naturally to the first chapter of John. They viewed the prologue of John (1:1-18) as a representation of the “divine realm” (πλήρωμα, *plerōma*) and many key terms in John—“word” (λόγος, *logos*), “light” (φῶς, *phōs*), “life” (ζωή, *zōē*), “truth” (ἀλήθεια, *alētheia*), “grace” (χάρις, *chāris*)—as individual “aeons” (divine emanations) of “the one” rather than what John intends, which are the identifiers of the Messiah. Much Gnostic vocabulary was arguably “biblical,” yet their account of God and His work markedly contrasted the Christian account of the cosmos and the God whose purposes were being realized therein.

Early Christianity’s most important defender against Gnosticism was Irenaeus of Lyon (c.125-202 CE) who passionately believed that the continuity of God’s people from apostolic times was essential to the continuity of the gospel story that had been received.²⁸ For that reason, it was essential to only read scripture in light of that story and under the guidance and authority of the community which is its custodian, the church.²⁹

Because the issue was the reading of biblical vocabulary as redefined according to an alternative mythological narrative, Irenaeus knew that a simple war of words would accomplish nothing. Merely countering Gnostic appropriations with “that word doesn’t mean so-and-so, it means this” would have been pointless. Instead, he had to reposition the terms confiscated by the Gnostics into a gospel account to convince his readers (including, or maybe especially, the church faithful who had

26. See the work of Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (Yale, 2005).

27. Gnosticism is a blanket term for a family of movements, teachings, and communities whose common feature was the claim that esoteric knowledge was the key to everything from superior, first-hand knowledge of God to the complexities of human nature to the key to eternal life. It was not an organized philosophical school, so we should be thinking “Gnosticisms.”

28. Following the model in 1 Cor. 15:1-2, 11.

29. Irenaeus’s most influential work, “Against Heresies” contains many references which illustrate this view, including Book IV, ch. 26.

been lured by the elegance of the Gnostic myth) that the apostolic usage of this vocabulary was the only correct way to read and use it if one wanted to remain authentically Christian and faithful to the apostolic witness, as well as to enjoy the saving gifts of union with Christ.

By the time of the early 4th century, with the major persecutions largely behind them, Christian teachers were forced to contend with the heresy of Arianism. This represented not so much an importation of pagan philosophy as a short-cut through the challenge posed by the Christian doctrine of the relation of the Father and the Son in order to avoid a conflict with an established public worldview that could not abide co-equality at the top of the “great chain of being.” This became a debate over scripture as Arians quoted verse after verse in an effort to prove that the ontological and temporal subordination of the Son to the Father was a thoroughly scriptural idea that would spare them from that supposed absurdity.³⁰ Although there were plenty of arguments about words and terms, the defenders of existing orthodoxy once again found that attempting a standard proof-texting duel would not win this debate. Athanasius of Alexandria initiated the response with his magisterial *On the Incarnation*, and then later in the fourth century, the Cappadocian theologians Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus continued the refutation of Arianism, which by that time had gained several defenders far more erudite than Arius himself.

Athanasius (c. 328-373) moved right to the heart of the matter by insisting that all interpretive work regarding Jesus the Son and Word of God must be organized around the central point of the gospel, the purpose of the incarnation, which he articulated in his famous phrase, “God became human in order that humans might become divine.” In doing so, he was able to return passages like Hebrews 2:9-10, a pillar passage in the Arian claim that Christ had a beginning, to their proper position in the saving narrative.³¹

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-394), writing two generations after Athanasius, understood better than most that correcting the Arian thinkers on a biblical term-by-term or verse-by-verse basis would have no effect. To be sure, Gregory and his companions went to the Bible to gather the substance of their claims, but the overall argument could only be won by representing the various passages in a way that would in turn make the best sense of the whole Bible, thereby identifying and serving the *skopos* of the entire scriptural witness. In that way, the scriptures acted as arbiter and judge of the dispute. Gregory and the others had to demonstrate that only by adhering to the same economy of salvation they had received would the

30. Even a partial catalog of Arian citations numbers more than a dozen passages: Exodus 7:1; Deuteronomy 6:4; Proverbs 8:22; Psalm 82:6; Isaiah 53; Matthew 26:39; Mark 10:18; Mark 13:32; John 14:28; Romans 16:27; I Cor. 1:4; I Cor. 15:24-28; I Tim. 2:5; Hebrews 5:5-9, and so on.

31. See Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, section 10. A fine modern introduction and translation by John Behr is available in the Popular Patristics series from St. Vladimir Seminary Press.

entire canon enjoy full internal coherence. What follows is an extended quote from Gregory's *Refutation to the Claims of Eunomius*.³² We should take particular note of the biblical language that is strategically arranged throughout Gregory's comment.

It is clear beyond question that because we are by birth flesh and blood ... [he] himself led the way in this birth, drawing down the Holy Spirit upon the water by his own baptism, so that in all things he became the first-born of those who are spiritually born again, and gave the name of brethren to those who partook in a birth like his own by water and the Spirit. But since it was also necessary that he should implant in our nature the power to rise again from the dead, he becomes the "first-fruits of those who slept"³³ and the "first-born from the dead,"³⁴ in that he first by his own act "loosed the pains of death."³⁵ ... Thus, just as by having shared in the washing of regeneration he became "the first-born among many brethren,"³⁶ and again by having made himself the first fruits of the resurrection, he obtains the name of the "first-born from the dead," thereby having preeminence in all things. Just as "all old things," as the apostle says, "have passed away,"³⁷ he becomes the first-born of the new creation of humanity in Christ by the two-fold regeneration—Holy Baptism and the resurrection from the dead—becoming for us in these two things at once the Prince of Life, the first-fruits, the first-born. ... In these words he sums up (ἀνακεφαλαιουται, *anakephalaioutai*)³⁸ the whole aim (σκοπόν, *skoron*) of his dispensation (οἰκονομία, *oikonomia*) as a human person. For humankind turned away from God, and "served those which by nature were no gods,"³⁹ and even though they were the children of God, they became attached to an evil so-called "father." For this cause ... [he] sends to his brethren the announcement of himself not in his *divine* character, but in that which he shares with us, saying, "I am departing in order to make—through my own self—that true Father, from whom you were separated, to be your Father,

32. This work somehow got spliced into Gregory's "Against Eunomius" (*Contra Eunomium* [CE]) as early as the sixth century as a substitute for book 2 of CE, which was apparently too speculative. The correct order of the CE was only restored with Werner Jaeger's critical edition of Gregory's works in the mid-20th century, which means that an accessible English translation of *Refutation* appears as "Book II" of CE in the Gregory of Nyssa volume of *NPNF*, which had been based on the earlier pre-critical Migne edition. A more recent translation became available in 2018 from Brill Press, edited by Miguel Brugarolas. The translation presented here is by this essay's author, based on the Jaeger edition.

33. I Cor. 15:20.

34. Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5.

35. Acts 2:24.

36. Romans 8:29.

37. II Cor. 5:17.

38. Or "recapitulates," a term that sits at the heart of Irenaeus' work.

39. Gal. 4:8.

and—through my own self—to make that *true* God, from whom you had turned away, to be *your* God, for by that first-fruits which I have assumed, I am in myself presenting all humanity to its God and Father.⁴⁰

Gregory repositions this broad array of passages—many of which were Arian favorites!—within a larger Christological framework that restores them to their proper role. He even states near the end of this passage “In these words, [Christ] sums up the whole aim of his dispensation as human” as a way of explaining why there is apostolic language that could be misinterpreted ontologically as subordinating the Son to the Father. He identifies the purpose of these words and passages as pertaining to Christ’s voluntary humiliation in order to bring humanity to God, and in doing so, he deprives the Arian framework of its ability to use these passages to prove the inferior nature of the Son with respect to the Father. We are reminded, perhaps, of Irenaeus’s love for *recapitulation* as an organizing idea for the drama of redemption or Athanasius’ use of *skopos* to refer not only to the scriptures but to the Incarnation itself; both authors made moves similar to what we see Gregory doing. Arius exploited a loophole of sorts in Christianity’s heretofore imprecise Christology by claiming that identifying the Son as a post-temporal creation of the Father was a perfectly acceptable way of talking about the godhead. In responding, Gregory does not, as noted before, simply gainsay the Arians’ terminological faults but follows the pattern of Jesus in John 3 and Acts 1 by reiterating the grand story of God’s determination to reconcile all things, weaving those key terms and phrases back in to demonstrate their true place in that story and telling the story in such a way that it only makes sense if the Son is coeternal with the Father.⁴¹ In doing so, Gregory in addition to those before and after him, in defending their usage of the various biblical terms, also move forward to give fresh expression to things to which they were already deeply convinced.

This, then, is an interesting instance of not rhetorical-philosophical but homiletical-evangelical strategy. In the Arian controversy, the orthodox defenders cannot avoid addressing the gaps in the received account of the apostolic witness, so they must employ terms that do not derive directly from scripture. In doing so, they demonstrate

40. Emphases and quotation marks added by translator for clarity.

41. An example is the term Gregory uses here (*ἀνακεφαλαιούνται*, *anakephalaiouta*: “sums up”), picking it up from Romans 13:9 and Ephesians 1:10 and combining it with *skopos* (“goal,” Philippians 3:14) and *oikonomia* (1 Tim. 1:4, *et passim*) to bring fresh precision to these terms. Here we might well include a somewhat anachronistic critique, but it still bears note: In the last 2/3 of the 20th century, it became fashionable among preachers to zero in on individual words and their broad historical backgrounds. Among church bodies where an educated clergy was and is valued, the approach to meaning that was exemplified by “Kittel,” aka, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, was widespread. Millions heard sermons that included claims about what a particular word “really” means because its usage was traced backwards to some supposedly more fundamental inherent meaning. This was methodologically flawed on a number of levels, but the primary concern was that it represented the opposite of the approach described here, wherein words are endowed with meaningful content by virtue of their placement in the overall narrative of salvation.

how these ideas work in service to the *existing* vocabulary and in turn to the overall story (see the Greek words pointed out in the extended quote above). One could say that they were following the admonition of Jesus in Matthew 13:52 where he states, “every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his treasure that which is new and that which is old.”

It was up to Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and others to bring out of their treasure “what is new” (for example, the *homoousios* formulations, the defense of infinity as a proper postulate of God, the fullest account of the purpose of the Incarnation) in an effort to newly showcase and stabilize “what is old.” Enriching the gospel story, the *skopos*, allowed the biblical language to retain its original force and even strengthened it against new challenges.

This is precisely what our present-day preachers and teachers must do to provide competent leadership for God’s people in employing the scriptures as the language of the faith. It should be familiar enough territory if for no other reason than it imitates the rhetorical pattern of Jesus who would set the stage for his hearers with parabolic stories or divine acts of mercy and healing, then only in conclusion reveal what he was really talking about, such as a text from Israel’s scriptures or a reality about life in God’s kingdom.⁴² The Matthew 13:52 dictum cited above concludes not with a biblical text but with a new dominical pronouncement that will itself become scripture. Effective sermons often do not necessarily begin with the pericope itself but with a gradual explication of the point the preacher wants to make and then ends with, “and *that’s* why the scripture says” that which it says. The interpreter has done exactly what Jesus and the patristic thinkers did: set up the description of the faith in such a way that the scriptures make sense when read or heard. In other words, when someone asks for a definition, respond with a story.

Contemporary Problems, Creating Solutions

This discipline must have an internal objective of informing, preparing, and strengthening the believers to make our external witness most authentic and effective. To address that objective, another seemingly-obvious question arises: why is any of this important or even useful? If any given person desires an enhanced spiritual life or a more effective walk of discipleship, why should she or he not be allowed to construct or adopt whatever system or object-of-faith that best suits him with whatever comfy language seems to fit? Why insist that we stick close to or at least begin with the Bible and the relatively few extra-biblical terms that have by necessity arisen to support it? Furthermore, why must we insist that those terms must be bracketed in their potential use by one special story and not another?

As with all things in this discussion, the answer requires more nuance than might be initially presumed. In reality, no one has an enforceable copyright on Christian

42. See, for example, the parable of the vineyard (Luke 20:9-19) and eating with sinners (Matthew 9:9-13).

vocabulary or on the brand “Christian,” the long, tragic upshot of this has been almost continuous disunity among Christians since the dawn of the Church, with periods of sanctioned atrocities that were often defended using biblical language. We must also concede that there is much at stake at every level of this conflict. In the current decade, the co-option of the Christian vision and the scriptures that attest to it has reached a pinnacle rarely seen since the Middle Ages, reaching all the way from the Russian Orthodox blessing of the Ukraine invasion to the re-assertion of Christian Nationalism in the United States, to the failure of bishops to discipline congregations employing thoroughly pagan creeds in violation of confessions as well as constitutions. Once again, can the average in-the-pew believer be blamed for throwing up hands in despair at ever sorting out this blatant repudiation of John 17 that is the current church? Can we blame the average preacher for throwing up hands in despair because of the repulsive baggage that Christianity and its signature words has hanging around its neck? This adds to that same pew-sitter’s insecurity about whether he or she knows enough to trust the Bible translation that has been handed to them.

As much as pastors might love to mollify that distressed pew-sitter with disarming language, they cannot escape that the struggle is real. The church’s life is often a symptom of the phenomenon it is attempting to identify, which is why pastors must not shy away from this language but lean into it. The gospel, whose centerpiece is “the risen Jesus is Lord of all,” only makes sense if one pairs it with the New Testament’s diagnosis of this present life and the sin that comes with it, thereby acknowledging that there are powers at work beyond the ability of ordinary humans to face that if ignored could yield a repeat of the 20th century, the deadliest epoch in human history, with plenty of blame to go around. Paul, in Romans 3, says what all people eventually realize if they are being honest—“all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” This verse is not a scolding moralism about quotidian misbehaviors but is rather an admission: we are all *dying*, we are *all dying together* and are even *helping each other get there*.

Eventually, when this truth hits (as it should each time we gather as community), we, first, need language to identify and describe it and, second, to make sure it is accompanied by language about the alternate story that assures us of an outcome that is different from the one that anyone with eyes can see is inevitable. As Jesus said in his appeal for his followers to come to terms with the gravity of his words, “let anyone who has ears listen.”⁴³

I contend, however, that one is not required to resolve or even face all of these uncertainties before adopting the language of Scripture as the language of faith. If that were necessary, no one would ever come to faith. We do not have to burden our brains with complex theories about how language works. Rather, when we

43. Matt. 11:15, Mark 4:9, Revelation 2. In my work with teens, I will often compliment their honest expressions of hopelessness, reminding them that they are wise to be seeing through the thin promises of the world around them. Our task then, of course, is to articulate a more reliable hope based on grounded promises rather than wishful thinking.

locate the *skopos* of the Scriptures in the apocalyptic good news of God's repeated and persistent self-revelatory in-breaking, we find that God engages us at all the levels of our own complicated and frustrating relationships to ourselves, others, the community around us, and the wide world beyond us, as well as the moments of joy, growth, hope, and peace. We need neither to completely settle on what all of these Christian words officially mean before we begin to live as God's person or God's people. We might very well ask, and *ought* to ask, what various terms mean, how they function, and what claim they lay upon us. We are *first*, though, in the business of knowing and proclaiming the larger story in which God wants to include each of us and, in response to that, engaging in thanksgiving and service. Does anyone lack adequate words for even expressing gratitude let alone describing what God has done? Certainly. However, that longing in the asking of the question "what language shall I borrow" is the very thing that places the believer in the position of being able to come to any kind of position, even a provisional one, regarding God's deeply gracious action in one's life. Doxology and confession are the foundational prerequisites to any further appropriation of vocabulary for the telling of the Christian story. We learn what the language means by using the language in a live setting.

Of note is the number of times in the scriptures where the response to God's activity in Israel or Jesus's healing work is not initially reflection or analysis but thanksgiving. Additionally, the nearly physical center of the gospel of John chapter 9 where, aside from the words of Jesus, some locate the entire center of gravity of John's gospel: "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.'... 'Lord, I believe,' and he worshiped him."⁴⁴ The boldness of this man in rejecting the requirement that he first rise to the level of expert in the law before confessing his faith exemplifies the very perspective proposed here. Other examples where praise and thanksgiving are highlighted are to be found in Exodus 15, Judges 5, Luke 5, 17, and 18, and Mark 5. The Apostle Paul is, in fact, something of an outlier in New Testament stories of meeting Jesus.⁴⁵ His immediate response is not humble gratitude but immediately and aggressively proclaiming Jesus as Son of God, which earns him in fewer than a dozen verses a trip back to Tarsus so that he won't cause any more trouble.⁴⁶

The lesson we take from these and many other stories from both Old and New Testaments is that new or seasoned believers need not be shy about beginning to talk about faith with words of praise, thanksgiving, confession, confusion, frustration, and hope. This is the perfect opportunity to recall the well-trodden path of recommending the Psalms, for all of those sentiments and more are found there. Pastoral consolation of the distraught, the angry, or the arrogant, or even celebration with the overjoyed, gets enhanced if the conversation becomes triadic by including the Scriptures and calling in the witnesses of old to lead in song and letting their words

44. John 9:25 and 9:38.

45. Acts 9:1-9.

46. Acts 9:30.

carry us beyond the liturgy and the pastor's study into the tasks and routines of our weekday vocation. We can easily get lost in the theoretical and philosophical detail of what constitutes an adequate and appropriate expression of God's entire enterprise, but the permission we grant to our parishioners to learn and repeat the sturdy words of our faith, as drawn from Scripture, can lead to the very fulfillment of the whole church's mission: go and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them.

The flip side of providing congregations with robust words for understanding the world's situation and God's address to it is the task of resisting the winsome but thin analyses of human sciences and two-dimensional critiques regarding the human situation, not because they are incorrect in every sense but because they are not comprehensive enough to get the job done. Friedrich Nietzsche famously predicted that art would replace religion, and multiple theorists from Christopher Lasch to Phillip Rieff have predicted that the language of therapy would eventually replace the language of faith. Though no one has famously issued a similar warning that the language of corporate management might replace the language of the church, such a concern would not be unwarranted because it has been happening. A disagreement with all three of these thinkers is this: their predictions were uniformly based on the supposed inability of the existing religious (specifically Christian) language to comprehend the real situations of people, systems, and cultures, both in their shortcomings and their vision. In contrast, the Christian language was and is in fact superior, except that local interpreters have not always fully met the challenge of continuously populating those terms with grand and specific descriptors so that they continue to unfold the patterns of the lives of the faithful and God's aims as well as keep them tethered to the centuries-old ability of the Christian narrative to make sense of nonsense,⁴⁷ thus providing people with hope that overcomes both despair and injustice.⁴⁸

A great example centers on the word "sin." People are told that this word should be avoided in sermons because it has become too enmeshed with a message of shame, which may be true. There has yet to be a term coined, however, that can so readily serve the story Christians really want to tell—the creation has been left on its own in isolation from God and does not even quite understand its own purpose, and humans, charged with stewardship of the world and its inhabitants, have instead created a juggernaut of self-interest into which every newborn person is swept up and from which none can escape. Catechists and preachers have the opportunity with those who come with hard questions to confirm this malfunction in what should have been paradise. Compassionate listening, resonance with the downtrodden, and the unmasking of wickedness's arrogant defenders can provide terms like "sin" with their content so that when people gather on the Lord's Day, they do indeed hear a bigger story and find themselves to be a part of it.

47. "Making sense out of nonsense" – an exact quote from a recent 8th grade Virginia Synod youth event planner when describing what the Christian faith does.

48. Alas, it cannot be taken for granted that theological education will make this an explicit goal that should be common to all its endeavors across the range of disciplines that constitute preparation for pastors.

The challenge of translating experiences into words and then expecting them to endure through the changes of time and place certainly faces congregations and leaders in general. Over my five decades in youth and young adult ministry, though, I have seen it in sharp relief when it comes to conversing with teens and young adults whose childhood faith formation, if they had any at all, was not sturdy enough to last them into adulthood. I sometimes refer to this population as “feral believers” as they are perhaps not completely unchurched in terms of their family history but are often untethered by the kinds of loyalties that in past generations might have bound them to a church body or at least a confessional core as a kind of traveling home. These young people may have been expertly catechized, but they also frequently discovered that the situation they encountered on typical Sunday mornings did not manage to convince them that they were part of a larger story in which they were an essential player wherein everything is at stake. Instead, they had come to see themselves as customers, testing the wares being presented to see if they might like to make a purchase.

Of importance in countering such practices, biblical story and vocabulary are just as much a matter of communicating the distinctive call of Christian community as they are communicating a compelling truth. Presuming that at least some of that is true, the homilist might well shudder from fear because she or he faces multiple dangers. Even the richest examples of biblical vocabulary may find themselves commandeered for shallow purposes, the smoothing over of harsh realities in the name of providing comfort. To be sure, proclaimers must be wise, compassionate, and fiercely protective of the dimly burning wicks that routinely populate the pews. Those same qualities, however, should drive the catechist, the preacher, and the liturgist to tell the truth in ways that grant permission to the hearers to be dissatisfied with their personal or the world’s status quo and to see God’s people as having a thoroughly unique handle on that situation. The question “What language shall I borrow” is not just a question about which words to choose to talk about things impossible to describe but is also a question about what overall message one intends to send and how to frame the proclamation so that the faithful end up with an effective structure in which the words they speak to themselves and eventually to others befit the claim of the Christian message to be a thoroughgoing account of things and a vision for what is to come. When anyone hears a sermon, he or she is justified in asking a critical question, “Is this my story or not,” and the follow-up question, “Are these my people or not?”

Alongside this risk of misuse by both homilists and catechists is the hazard that Christian language will become so circumscribed and self-referential that it will become at once unintelligible to outsiders and unaffected by one’s neighbors’ and the world’s suffering. This can happen when something as simple as the word “sin” begins to connote exclusively the individual’s ledger of improper actions and “salvation” becomes no more than their divine erasure. This private transaction isolates the follower of Christ from any necessity to respond to God’s action by acknowledging the world’s brokenness and the Christian’s call to join in the work

of repair. The same thing happens in particularly personal-righteousness-oriented expressions of Christianity with terms like “biblical.”⁴⁹ Its referent depends almost entirely on the cultural-linguistic setting in which it is used and, in the practices criticized herein, actually functions as much as a shibboleth or a call to guard boundaries as it does a shorthand for being faithfully consistent with Scripture.

Forward in the Language of Faith

What language, then, shall Christians borrow? It is not simply a matter of going to the Bible and cherry-picking words, although the aforementioned recommendation of mining the Psalms remains a good practice. Christians must find how those terms, phrases, and passages have been used to tell God’s distinctive story. Often in youth ministry, when young people are invited to describe their faith, they will often reference the songs they have sung in their most exuberant moments at a campfire experience or a fully relational eucharistic celebration, those times when they are most aware of the ineffable presence of God in a community in the context of a sacramental (or other holy) action under the authority of a powerful gospel word. These young saints deserve a word of encouragement and commission: this language is yours! Take it! Own it! Tell it!

Finally, how could Christians possibly reflect on Scripture as the language of faith and fail to say more about Jesus as the Word of God? Beyond the reflecting on the role of language and vocabulary in the construction of an integrated gospel proclamation, there is another side. Of course, Christians proclaim Jesus himself, but it can become this odd situation where one introduces the main character of the story but allows him to fade into the background like John the Baptist.

There is another angle to this story—the irony that the Word of God was the consummate listener. The gospels provide examples, particularly where Jesus asks questions and listens for answers, the entire purpose of which being to lead His conversation partner onward. Perhaps the most well-known example is the Emmaus Way story from Luke 24. The pericope begins with verse 13, and Jesus’s first words in verse 17—“What are you discussing with each other while you walk along”—elicit a low-key testy response from Cleopas and his companion, which might well be paraphrased as “what in the world do you *think* we might be discussing?” When Jesus follows with “what things,” a proto-creed from the pair that nevertheless remains incomplete comes next. In what is the key lesson for the Christian, Jesus listens before speaking, then expands on what they have said, tying it back to everything that they already knew but had not been organized for them.

To help seekers and seasoned believers alike own the richness of the biblical vocabulary, leaders need to listen and know the stories of their flocks and know the scriptures intimately so that they can make connections that people can receive in

49. This essay’s author is writing in the southern tier of Virginia, which has contributed more than its share of such practices to the world.

order to interpret themselves, the world, and then, ideally, gradually become skilled at doing the same thing for others. This is the mechanism by which the language of scripture takes on new life for a new generation. This could even be thought of as the means by which scripture—particularly the New Testament—became scripture. Although Paul was surely writing with the intent of being authoritative, it is unlikely that he anticipated his words becoming on par with Israel's Bible. The writing, however, was only the first step of the process because we also know of letters and gospels that were written that did not become scripture. The crucial step was that these were reread, shared, and found to be useful, authoritative, and resonant with the orally received gospel by communities beyond the original audience. As those writings gained importance with these new audiences, so did the language that was contained therein, thus creating a catalog of core terms and ideas that could be taught to newcomers and handed down to succeeding generations as representing the apostolic witness. New believers could develop new vocabulary as they needed it, knowing that they were answerable not only to the terms, concepts, and stories of their forebears but also to the intent, the *skopos*, of those terms, stories, and concepts. They had found an answer of sorts to the question "What language shall I borrow?" by fully realizing the breadth of meaning contained in the writings they had received, and then, giving thanks to God with those words, inviting others to do the same.

Near the end of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is a hymn whose text begins: "Voices raised to you we offer; tune them, God, for songs of praise."⁵⁰ These words demonstrate the author's recognition that all of this talk is finally for God's glory and the redemption of earth's peoples. After a set of stanzas honoring the three persons of the Trinity, the hymn then concludes with words similar to the passage quoted at the outset from "O Sacred Head": "How can any praise we offer measure all the thanks we owe?" We may ask that question somewhat rhetorically, knowing that through eternity we will always lack the full ability to express God's glory, but we also know that we have the perfect place to begin with the language of Scripture.

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