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Jesus's Uses of Language and Their Contemporary Significance

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In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days has spoken to us by his Son.

Hebrews 1:1–2

Previously, God revealed himself through the prophets' oral and written uses of language. For example, the Lord "revealed himself to Samuel through his word" (1 Sam. 3:21). Peter can refer to the entire Old Testament as the prophetic word (2 Pet. 1:19–21). Now God has revealed himself by his Son's uses of language. In other passages of Scripture, God may figuratively "speak" by Jesus's sinless character and mighty deeds. But in Hebrews 1:1–2, the parallel to divine revelation in the recorded words of God's prophetic spokesmen calls for a literal emphasis on divine revelation in Jesus's incomparable *words*.

Jesus did not write a book, but he was not dumb, that is, unable to speak in human languages. Neither was he a mime who chose not to speak with verbal signs. Jesus's linguistic sentences conveyed simple and profound meanings that still guide the devotion of people around the world.

An analysis of Jesus's uses of language should be of interest to any philosophers who call him Lord, whether they happen to be influenced primarily by orthodox, neo-orthodox, open theist, or postmodernist theologies. Surely the importance of Jesus's uses of language merits much more extensive research in the future.

This introductory analysis distinguishes Jesus's cognitive and noncognitive meanings and designates his noncognitive content "relational" and his cognitive meaning "propositional." It then lists a number of instances of his varied kinds of relational language, and considers their significance for evangelical scholars who neglect the use of loving relational language in their defense of revealed propositional truth. Next, it illustrates the dependence of Jesus's relational language on the truth of his propositional teaching

(from his conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well). The essay then cites several instances of Jesus's propositional assertions and investigates their source, his criteria, and his critical realism. Then it considers the significance of his assertive language for evangelical philosophers and theologians who debase or deny propositional revelation. Finally, it urges that EPS scholars exhibit in their teaching and writing the consilience of both our Lord's relational and propositional uses of language.

Assumptions

For its present purposes, this analysis of Jesus's language assumes several basic points established elsewhere.¹ (1) The living God, who is spirit, created humans in his image and reveals himself through his words (1 Sam. 3:21). As spirits in God's image, humans are capable of receiving divinely revealed information in order to fellowship with him, fulfill his plans on earth, and in some measure relationally reflect his moral likeness. (2) The living God of the Bible, who created humans in his image, is not removed from human intelligence and language by an alleged "infinite qualitative distinction" as in the conceptually unknowable "totally other" God of the mystics, Kierkegaard, and Barthians. (3) God's eternal Logos, Son, or Word became the fully human Jesus of history (John 1:1, 14), and he communicated in ordinary language with his human image bearers who are morally accountable for their response. (4) The intended meanings of Jesus's sayings (probably in Aramaic) were conveyed accurately in the divinely inspired original manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. They are accurate whether expressed by direct or indirect quotation, the active or passive mood, or a condensed paraphrase. (5) Many hundreds of extant copies of at least parts of the early Greek manuscripts of the Gospels cumulatively establish a strong case for the readings in the original autographs. (6) Today we have reliable translations of Jesus's statements from the Greek manuscripts of the Gospels. One such is the New International Version (NIV), which I cite in this paper.

Two Major Uses of Language

Philosophical analysts and logicians generally distinguish two uses of human language: cognitive and noncognitive. Patrick J. Hurley's text on logic explains: "Terminology that conveys information is said to have cognitive meaning, and terminology that expresses or evokes feelings is said to

1. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987); G. Lewis and B. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

have emotive meaning.”² In their *Introduction to Logic*, Copi and Cohen add that informative language takes the form of propositions. “Only propositions assert that something is (or is not) the case, and therefore only they can be true or false . . . Truth and falsity do not apply to questions, commands, or exclamations. Moreover, every proposition is either true or false.”³

This article refers to cognitive language as “propositional” and to noncognitive language as “relational.” Relational uses of language are not true or false, but are effective or ineffective in expressing people’s inner personal feelings, desires, or relationships. Two sentences illustrate the difference. “Susan is one who has an aggressive form of cancer.” That proposition informs us of what is either true or false independent of anyone’s emotions. “I feel very sad about Susan’s cancer because she is a good friend.” That sentence expresses a related person’s inner feelings either effectively or ineffectively.

A review of our Lord’s terminology shows that he employed many varieties of relational (noncognitive) language.

Some Instances of Jesus’s Relational Language

How did Jesus personally relate to God’s image bearers? Jesus expressed himself in a variety of types of noncognitive, personal, or relational language.

Expressive. Jesus expressed his personal emotions when he said of Jerusalem, “I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings” (Matt. 23:37). In Gethsemane, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matt. 26:38).

Evocative. Jesus sought primarily to evoke emotions in others when he said, “Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin!” (Matt. 18:7).

Directive. As the disciples went out to minister two by two, Jesus gave them explicit directions (Matt. 10:5–20). On another occasion he quoted the first and second greatest commandments (Matt. 22:37–38). Just before his ascension into heaven, he gave his followers his great commission (Matt. 28:18–20).

Exhortative. Before his death, Jesus ministered in love to his followers, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me” (John 14:1).

Performative. Personally, to the centurion, Jesus said, “It will be done just as you believed it would” (Matt. 8:13). To the paralytic, Jesus said, “Take

2. Patrick J. Hurley, *A Concise Introduction to Logic*, 8th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 73.

3. Irving Copi and Carl M. Cohen, *Introduction to Logic*, 11th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 4.

heart, son, your sins are forgiven you” (Matt. 9:2). To the woman who had bled for twelve years, “Take heart, daughter. Your faith has healed you” (Matt. 9:21).

Invitational. At times our Lord said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened” (Matt. 11:28).

Interrogatory. “Who do people say that I am? What about you? Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:13, 15).

Petitionary. In the Lord’s paradigm of prayer: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:10–12).

Metaphorical. “I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the door, the way, the truth and the life” (John). The metaphors had a point that could be stated in propositions, but the figures of speech as such were not propositional. He was not a literal lamb or a literal door.

Parabolic (Matt. 13). To illustrate his points, Jesus often used a story or a parable. The point or points of the parables were cognitive, but the parables as such were noncognitive and illustrative.

The evidence is conclusive that Jesus used several types of loving relational language: expressive, evocative, interrogative, exhortative, performative, prayerful, metaphorical, and parabolic. Undoubtedly, many other instances also communicate Jesus’s relational love for God and others. For example, after Peter denied knowing him three times, Jesus did not exclaim, “You coward!” Our Lord related to one of his best, but disappointing, third-year students with a repeated question to bring out the most basic inner issue, “Do you love me?” (John 21:15–17).

The Contemporary Significance of Jesus’s Relational Language

In view of this mere sample of the evidence, a philosopher who calls Jesus Lord does not teach only with propositions. Rather, a lover of wisdom who follows our Lord’s model of love for God and neighbor develops personal relationships by using language that is expressive, evocative, interrogative, exhortative, performative, prayerful, metaphorical, and parabolic. Some conservative evangelicals may be missing this mark, not so much by denying the values of Jesus’s relational language, but by neglecting them. An occupational hazard for both novices and veterans in philosophy and theology is the tendency to be so preoccupied with the important task of clarifying and defending cognitive propositions that they fail to use loving relational language with their “neighbors.” We may become experts at defending ourselves and tend to overlook the needs of our families, students, assistants, and colleagues.

Our uses of language give outward evidence of what is in our inner selves, our souls or spirits (figuratively, our “hearts”). Our Lord explained,

Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned. (Matt. 12:34–37)

Our uncaring words make evident to others our inward lack of a faithful love either for God or them. In our relational words, how apparent is our love to our close associates and to the “publicans and sinners,” the poor, the orphans, the prisoners, and the internationals for whom English is a second language? Evangelicals seek not only to fulfill their Lord’s great commission by teaching students to obey all that he taught, but also by relating to others, as he did, in faithful and holy love.

Do not Jesus’s personal relational uses of language reveal something of the relationality of God the Father? Later, this article differs with Clark Pinnock’s reductive relationalism. However, given this survey of Jesus’s revelation of God’s personal and loving nature, we may find an element of truth in Pinnock’s allegation: “Conventional theology did not leave enough room for relationality in God’s essence.”⁴ May we Christian philosophers not learn from God’s having spoken to us in Jesus’s uses of relational language to emphasize the relationality of God as we contact his image bearers?

Although the meaning conveyed by Jesus’s noninformative language does not directly assert what is outwardly true or false, Jesus’s relational language effectively or infallibly accomplishes Jesus’s different inner relational purposes with his hearers. The Gospel writers, by the inspiration of “the Spirit of truth,” recorded Jesus’s *wording* inerrantly. That wording conveys the relational *meaning* God intended. So Jesus inwardly felt the way the Gospels describe his feelings. However, since only propositional meanings can be true or false, the *content* conveyed by relational language does not have the quality of truth. So it makes little sense to refer to the meanings of relational language as “inerrant” and much more sense to regard them *infallible*, that is, not liable to fail. Jesus’s relational meanings did not fail (and still do not fail) to achieve their worthy and varied relational purposes. In brief, the wording of his relational language in the Gospels is recorded inerrantly; the varied meanings of his relational language achieves its purposes infallibly.⁵

4. Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 6.

The Values of Jesus's Relational Language Depend on the Truth of His Propositional Language

During a trip through Samaria, Jesus illustrated the fact that his language was not exclusively relational and that the value of his practical counsel depended on the truth of his propositional teaching. Although Jews did not associate with Samaritans, Jesus went out of his way to stop at Jacob's well. There he asked for a drink from a Samaritan woman. She came to realize that he was a prophet. So she asked whether she should worship on the mountain where the Samaritans worshipped or in Jerusalem where the Jews worshipped. Jesus said in effect, since "God is spirit," if she worships in spirit and truth, she can worship anywhere (John 4:24).

Jesus's answer to the Samaritan woman's practical question depends on the veracity of his proposition about God's inner nature. On another occasion, Jesus asserted that a spirit (*pneuma*) "does not have flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39). In Jesus's ordinary conversations, his relational language with a marginalized woman did not exclude propositional truth. Rather, the existential value of his relational guidance depended on the objective truth conveyed by his propositional assertion.

The propositional meaning of the indicative sentence asserting that "God is spirit" was time related, but not time bound! The truth that God is unlimited by space and time is not confined to one language or one community. The meaning of a proposition is to be distinguished from the audio and visual signs conveying it. Although Jesus affirmed that "God is spirit" in one particular first century language (probably Aramaic), his meaning is not restricted to that language. Bible translators have conveyed the meaning of "God is spirit" (*pneuma*) in innumerable languages.

Some contemporary scholars feature just one of Jesus's relational uses of language. Clark Pinnock, an open theist, prefers his metaphors. In his quest for "a biblical philosophy," he sought "for truth about reality in biblical metaphors rather than in currently available philosophical propositions."⁶ Why metaphors? Possibly because Pinnock thinks that he can better communicate his view of Christianity to contemporaries who hold a reductively relational philosophy.

Unfortunately, taking the Bible's metaphors very "seriously" leads Pinnock to think of God as corporeal!⁷ Pinnock is so taken by metaphors about God that he not only ignores his Master's teaching that "God is spirit," he contradicts it! If Pinnock's view of a corporeal God were true, Jesus would have answered the Samaritan woman that worship should be at the

5. For amplification of my uses of inerrancy and infallibility, see my "What Does Infallibility Mean?" *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 6 (1963): 18–27, or *Integrative Theology*.

6. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 123.

one place where God was physically located. If, and only if, it is universally true that “God is spirit,” can the practical, caring implication be made that all who worship in spirit and in truth may worship anywhere. A corporeal view of God not only ignores and contradicts Jesus’s proposition that “God is spirit,” but it fails to support his relational counsel about authentic worship! Furthermore, Jesus did not use only one type of relational language, metaphor.

When Jesus did employ metaphors and parables, they were not ends in themselves, but illustrated the information in his assertions. The worth of Jesus’s relational values will not long endure in the reductively relational talk of open theist, neo-orthodox, and postmodernist theologies and attempts at merely relational ministries. Only if relational love is based on the foundational framework of Jesus’s revealed propositions can his spiritual legacy remain distinct from the world’s perennial mysticism (that sprouts up each year as if it were brand new). Similarly, if the “emerging churches” and relational counseling centers influenced by such reductively relational theologies ignore Jesus’s numerous doctrinal assertions, they will lose their sense of reality and direction in a realistic world.

Some Instances of Jesus’s Propositional Language

What propositions in addition to “God is spirit” did Jesus assert? Keep in mind that a person’s propositions about what is objectively true in ordinary language are not always in standard form (S is P), but that they can be reformulated into that form.

(1) The meaning of his parables: In ordinary conversation, Jesus said, “Listen to what the parable of the sower of the seed means: The farmer sows the word” (Mark 4:14). Essential to the practical ministry of sowing in Jesus’s theistic world and life view, is the truth of the proposition that “the seed is the word.” Whether it is sowed on a path, on rocks, among thorns, or in good ground, what Christians disseminate is a word from God, not a human linguistic construction.

(2) The characteristics of Christian morality and spirituality: The blessings of his kingdom, Jesus asserts, are enjoyed by those with the characteristics of the beatitudes (Matt. 5:1–12). In addition he contends that, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20). Subsequently, Jesus corrected the Pharisee’s misinterpretations and additions to the Old Testament in the informative language of propositions. For example, “You have heard that it was said . . . But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matt. 5:22).

7. Ibid., 33, 81. Pinnock plans to publish a revision of this book.

- (3) Jesus utilized varied types of propositions.
- (a) *Conditional or Hypothetical*: “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, (then) your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, (then) your Father will not forgive you” (Matt. 6:14–15).
- (b) *Disjunctive*: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matt. 6:24).
- (c) *Universal Negative*: “Nothing outside a man (is that which) can make him ceremonially ‘unclean’” (Mark 7:15).
- (d) *Universal Affirmative*: “For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. [Here comes *the universal affirmative*] All these evils [are those that] come from inside and make a man unclean” (Mark 7:30).
- (e) *Particular Negative*: “The child [of Jarius] is not dead but asleep” (Mark 5:39).
- (f) *Particular Affirmative*: Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others” (Mark 12:43).
- (4) Metaphysical and temporal realities.
- (a) *God*: Jesus affirmed, not only that God is spirit, but also that “your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). He asserted his Father’s unique eminence, “My Father who has given them to me is greater than all” (John 10:29–30).
- (b) *Angels*: Jesus taught the reality and deathlessness of his messengers, the angels. “The harvesters are angels” (Matt. 13:39). He asserted that in the age of the resurrection, believers “can no longer die; for they are like the angels” (Luke 20:36).
- (c) *Human souls or spirits*: Jesus affirmed the distinct metaphysical and moral reality of one’s inner soul or spirit. “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). He further explained, “Then they [are those who] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matt. 25:46).
- (d) *His own deity and mission as the Messiah*: “The Jewish high priest [Caiaphas] asked him, ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?’ Jesus replied, ‘I am’” (Mark 14:61–62). Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus replied, “Yes, it is as you say” (Mark 15:2). Jesus asserted, “Before Abraham, I am.” Again, “You are from below; I am from above . . . If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins” (John 8:23–4). He added, “If you hold to my teaching, you are

really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (v. 31). “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

(e) *The predicted fact and purpose of his death*: Early in Jesus’s ministry, he said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). “I lay down my life for the sheep” (v. 15). The reality of the cross and its eternal significance is as relevant to every contemporary culture in the world as it was when he affirmed it.

(f) *The future*: Our Lord also asserted truth about *events then future* like his death and resurrection. “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19). Jesus also predicted his return to this earth for his own that is still future. “I will come back” (John 14:3). “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come” (Matt. 24:42).

The evidence is extensive; God has spoken by his loving Son’s many indicative sentences conveying information in propositions about what is the case. They include the meanings of his parables, the nature of authentic spirituality, the metaphysical realities in a Judeo-Christian theistic world, the moral realities that are the case in this fallen world, and his redemptive plans and purposes for his fallen image bearers present and future. In view of this evidence of Jesus’s propositions, how can one who calls Jesus Lord maintain a reductively relational philosophy, theology, or ministry?

Since only propositional meanings can be true or false, it is Jesus’s propositions that evangelicals affirm to be inerrant. In both their sentences and in their informative content, what the incarnate Logos affirms, God affirms. The redemptive plan that Jesus Christ asserted for God’s program in history was, is, and will be the case.

The linguistic *signs* in both Jesus’s propositional and relational *sentences* are inerrantly recorded. The varied *meanings* conveyed by his relational sentences are *infallible* or not liable to fail. The propositional *meanings* conveyed by his indicative sentences are true, that is, *inerrant*.

More will be said about Jesus’s propositional revelations after considering their source in revealed information. It seems apparent that the Father did not need to reveal to the incarnate Jesus how he felt in Gethsemane or the expressions in his other relational language.

The Source of Jesus’s Propositions

People asked, “How did this man get such learning without having studied?” (John 7:15). Jesus replied, “My teaching is not my own. It comes from

him who sent me” (v. 16). To his disciples, Jesus said, “Everything that I learned from my father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). In his high-priestly prayer, Jesus could say, “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world” (17:6). How did he reveal God himself? Not by an inexpressible religious encounter, but in words! He explains, “I gave them the words you gave me, and they accepted them” (v. 8). Again, “I have given them your word” (v. 14), and in prayer to the Father, Jesus said, “I gave them the *words you gave me*” (John 17:8, 14). Jesus taught that God the Father revealed to him propositional information about what is the case in reality.

Jesus’s assertions about God revealed God’s inner essence as he is in himself. Jesus explained, “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). So in Jesus’s understanding, his Father’s words expressed his Father’s inner essence. It is by Christ’s informational revelation that we can receive the gift of some knowledge of God as he is in himself. Does not a denial of any knowledge of God’s essence contradict the teaching of our Lord? Does it not put the authority of Kant and his endless followers above that of God’s eternal logos become flesh?

If Christ’s words are to be believed, his informative communications originated not with his first-century Jewish community or with the community of his young disciples, but with his heavenly Father! Although Jesus expressed the Father’s information in the ordinary sentences of a human language, that information did not originate with even a well-meaning human construction. The information Jesus affirmed came from the creator, sustainer, and designer of the way to remain just and to justify ungodly people.

We respond to Jesus’s teaching by both our belief and our faith. The object of our *belief* is revealed information about God and Christ conveyed by propositions.

The object of our *faith* is the persons (Father and Son) of whom the divinely revealed assertions speak by the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and illumination. By an informative revelation our commitment is diverted away from idols and directed to the Christ who atoned for our sins and rose again.

Since Jesus’s propositional revelations came from God the Father, they are true of what is the case not only for time, but also for eternity. Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Mark 13:31). Philosophers who do not contradict their professed Lord believe that God has (literally) “spoken” eternal truths to us in these last days by his Son (Heb. 1:1–2). In Jesus’s propositions we may learn about his heavenly Father, his universal providence, and his plan of redemption for sinful humanity. His revealed propositions are true to the ultimate reality with whom we have to do for time and eternity.

“Why was I born?” Jesus asked rhetorically. He answered Pilate, “In fact, for this reason I was born and for this [purpose] I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (John 18:37). Note that he did not come to testify mere-

ly to his relational values or to his first-century community's truth. Jesus said that he came to witness *in* human terminology to "the truth" (the definite article is in the Greek). "The truth" is inerrant and reliable because it came from the omniscient understanding of God, his heavenly Father. So, the loving "friend of sinners," while talking with people relationally, could inform them about realities with which all have to do in every community and culture around the world. His metaphors and parables were not ends in themselves but means to illustrate his cognitive assertions.

Can neo-orthodox theologians like Donald Bloesch honor the dynamic Lord of the Gospels and demean his propositional assertions as "static," "cold," and "frozen"?⁸ Our Lord said, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63). Words are the utterances of spirit. Through words spirits hold fellowship with spirits. Through divinely disclosed propositions spirits hold meaningful fellowship with spirits. Loyalty to Jesus's informative doctrinal statements holds communities of ethnically different people together in the fellowship of a church or an academic institution. There may be nonverbal fellowship between persons, but there is also a more specifically meaningful verbal fellowship. One who examines the evidence may improve communication by utilizing the Messiah's metaphors, stories, or parables, but one builds a worldview or theology on the propositions they illustrate.

Confusing revelation and salvation, Donald Bloesch wrote, "The word of God is not to be reduced to objective rational statements: it is God in action." Does he not remember that it was Jesus, not theologians, who expressed God the Father's words in propositions? Bloesch continues, "Revelation is being grasped by the power of the resurrected Christ and set in a completely new direction."⁹ It is not by revelation but by regeneration that one is grasped by the power of the risen Lord and set in a new direction.

Postmodernists Grenz and Franke take comfort in their denial of propositional revelation. They write that Bloesch, "drawing from a typical Barthian focus on revelation . . . declares in no uncertain terms, 'The Bible is not in and of itself the revelation of God but the divinely appointed means and channel of this revelation.' Consequently, Bloesch categorically denies that the Bible in itself is our authority."¹⁰ In contrast, evangelical thinkers affirm that God's written Word is their primary source and only inerrant standard of faith and practice.

One who takes the time to consider our Lord's uses of language does not build a philosophy on his performative, metaphorical, and parabolic language alone. Neither does one who is faithful to the biblical evidence cited

8. Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 26.

9. *Ibid.*, 26, 57.

10. Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 48–9.

above build a relational life on the Messiah's propositions alone. Christ's disciplined followers seek to emulate the coherence of both their Lord's propositional and relational emphases.

All of Jesus's relational and propositional meanings are inerrantly recorded. His inerrantly recorded *relational* language conveys infallible meanings (that are not liable to fail); his inerrantly recorded propositions convey true, that is, inerrant, information about what is the case. Since only propositional meanings can be true or false, it is Jesus's propositions that evangelicals affirm to be true, that is, inerrant. In his propositions what Jesus affirms, God affirms. Jesus affirmed the nature of God and truth about his providential and redemptive programs for history. What Jesus Christ taught is the case in reality.

Jesus's Definition of Truth

Like Pilate, we ask, "What is truth?" Truth, for Jesus, is not merely the correspondence of his human ideas with his human observations of things. Neither did he define truth as the way persons or communities interpreted their nonconceptual experiences at a given time. True assertions, according to Jesus, are those that correspond to, or are consistent with, the revealed mind of God. In his high priestly prayer Jesus said, "your Word is truth" (John 17:17). In that context he spoke of speaking God's words. The Logos does mean the person of Christ, but not only the living person; it also designates the words of Christ. Often he appealed to passages from the Old Testament as consistent with his teaching. Jesus's didactic assertions are without error, not because they were the views of the early church, but because they originated with God himself. His words are God's word, not merely a human word about personal or communal encounters with a conceptually undisclosed God.

The divinely revealed propositions that Jesus attested stand in judgment on individuals and communities that have heard and rejected them. Jesus's propositions were true, whether people assented to their truth and worshipped their referent or not. Barth and his followers confuse revelation with salvation. Salvation is Christomonistic. Jesus is the one mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5–6). But revelation is not Christomonistic. God has revealed information about himself and his moral principles, not only in Christ but also in creation (Rom. 1:20; 2:14–15) and in the inspired assertions preserved in Holy Scripture. Christ addressed people's minds as well as their desires, wills, and relationships. According to our Lord, God does not want mindless worshippers but those who love him with all their heart, soul, and mind (Matt. 22:37).

Sinners need not fear condemnation if they assent to the propositions of the gospel. The good news is made up of at least the following propositions that he either taught or implied. (1) The eternal Logos is he who became flesh. (2) The Jesus of Nazareth is the God-man who lived without sin. (3) He is the person who gave up his life as a ransom for sinners so that God could remain just and justify the ungodly. (4) He is the one who, having given the sacrifice sufficient for the salvation of all, rose again from the grave and ascended into heaven. With at least a childlike understanding of those gospel assertions, sinners become convinced of their truth, repent for their selfish ways, and commit themselves, not to the underlying energy of creation but to its dynamic, living Lord, the one of whom the gospel speaks. Believers may suffer for their faith, but they will remain faithful if, like Paul, they can say, I *know* whom I have believed, and am *convinced* that he is able to guard what I have *entrusted* to him for that (judgment) day (2 Tim. 1:12).

Jesus's Critical Realism

Since Jesus's propositions inform us about what is the case, three elements are involved, not only (1) his verbal signs, and (2) the meanings they conveyed, but also (3) their referents in reality as God the Father disclosed it to be.

Not all the propositions of the Sadducees and Pharisees were true. The great Deceiver exists, so some religious assertions are not true of reality, and all moral judgments are not good in God's sight. So Jesus urged that his followers critically distinguish true from false and good from evil assertions. Christ's teaching and example does not encourage an unfounded faith, naïve realism, or common sense realism. Rather, Jesus's teaching upholds a *critical realism*. To honor Jesus, evangelical philosophers critically distinguish, as he did, the one God from idols, the one Messiah from false Christs, true from false prophets, and good from evil spirits.

Speaking to the Pharisees Jesus said, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matt. 7:1). By that statement Jesus did not rule out all criticism; he rejected poorly supported criticisms. Before the end of that chapter of the Sermon on the Mount, he asks his followers to engage in critical testing of people who claim to speak for God. "Watch out for false prophets that come to you in sheep's clothing." Jesus also supplied a criterion: "by their fruit you will recognize them" (7:15–16). What Jesus criticized was the tendency of the Pharisees to judge others on insufficient and merely external evidence. On another occasion, Jesus advised, "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment" (John 7:24).

A right or critical judgment in Jesus's critical realism met at least three criteria. (1) It was one that fit the relevant, publicly observable evidence.

John the Baptist asked if he was the one to come, or should they expect someone else. Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matt. 11:3–5).

(2) A right judgment was consistent with the intended teaching of revealed assertions in the Old Testament that he came to fulfill, not destroy (Matt. 5:17–18). What he differed with in his Sermon on the Mount was the Pharisees’ misinterpretations and additions (Matt. 5:21–48).

(3) A righteous judgment is the good fruit of a morally transformed inner being (Matt. 7:15–20). The ultimate test is observable fruit from inward love for the living God of truth revealed in Christ’s words. The penultimate test as we make right judgments is outward *indicii* of our inward love for our neighbor as for ourselves (Matt. 22:37–40).

By at least these three criteria, Jesus taught that his followers should avoid unsupported judgments and make right, or critically tested, well-supported judgments about what is the case in reality.

The Contemporary Significance of Jesus’s Propositional Language

In *Beyond Foundationalism*, the late Stanley Grenz and John Franke reject any revealed propositional information universally true of metaphysical or temporal reality. So they also reject a critical realism (with referents in reality) and any universal criteria by which to test truth claims. Assuming a Barthian view of God as removed from our concepts by an infinite qualitative distinction, their divine revelation happens in Christomonistic wordless encounters with communities (in contrast to neo-orthodox encounters with individuals). Their Christomonism rejects general revelation, natural theology, and a propositional special revelation in Scripture. Revelation for them occurs as the speechless Christ confronts communities in meaning-deprived encounters. In their Bible, errant and fallible persons report their interpretations of these ineffable, communal encounters.

Grenz and Franke, in their postmodernist reductionism, reduce all the uses of biblical language to one form of relational language, the performative. They even force propositions into Austin’s speech-act theory of expressivist language.¹¹ Illustrating the speech-act theory, postmodernist Nancey Murphy claims that foundationalist and factual theories of language having failed, she is left only with an expressivist or performative account of religious language. So, the proposition “God is love” tells us nothing about God! What does it say? “When Christians say, ‘God is love’ they are really

11. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 24, 73.

expressing their intentions to lead agapeistic lives, an intention they fortify by telling inspirational stories about Jesus—which need not be true.”¹² Austin moved to shift attention from meaning as reference to meaning as use. Grenz and Franke, who hold that speech-act approach to language, would allege that the proposition “God is spirit” tells us nothing about God! On their showing, the meaning of “God is spirit” is in whatever the Samaritan community chose to do with it (there was no church community then).

Reductively, Grenz and Franke’s speech-act theory of meaning arbitrarily compresses all Jesus’s other relational sayings and all his propositional assertions (listed above) to the one performative use of language. In this Procrustean procedure, what Jesus intended to assert is no longer important. The goal of postmodern hermeneutics is not what Christ taught but what kind of action the postmodernist community may want the text of his words to say. The text of Jesus’s words in the Gospels is not from God incarnate, but a later construction of human language. Grenz’s and Franke’s view of language thereby contradicts Jesus’s own claim that the text of his words came from God.

Grenz and Franke explicitly choose to differ with the foundationalism of conservatives who consider the Bible an errorless storehouse for divine revelation, and who claim a special status for inspired biblical propositions.¹³ They make no exception for the language of Christ. They also differentiate themselves from conservatives who justify their claims with a rational argument from fulfilled prophecies. Apparently they have overlooked the fact that at Pentecost, the apostle Peter, while “filled with the Holy Spirit,” argued that Christ fulfilled Old Testament messianic predictions (Acts 2:14–35). On the basis of the eyewitness testimony to the fulfillment of predictions, Peter concluded, “God has made this Jesus . . . both Lord and Christ” (v. 36). Three thousand people responded, were baptized, and formed the first organized Christian church at Jerusalem. Plainly, the Holy Spirit uses logical argument based on evidence. The appeal to fact and logic in fulfilled prophecy did not begin, as postmodernists claim, with modernism, Charles Hodge, or Princeton theologians. Appeals to fact, logic, and authenticity tested the credentials of the Old Testament prophets (Deut. 13:1–3; 18:21–22). As we have noted, the Lord Jesus Christ taught the use of those criteria. The apostle Peter exhibited their use with the Jews at Pentecost, and the apostle Paul assumed them with the Gentile philosophers at Athens (Acts 17:16–34).

Grenz and Franke call evangelical theologians who affirm a propositional revelation “rationalists.” The “rationalists” they mention include Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, Gresham Machen, Carl Henry, Wayne Grudem,

12. Nancy Murphy, “Textual Relativism, Philosophy of Language, and the Baptist Vision,” In *Theology without Foundations*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1964), 247.

13. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 34.

Millard Erickson, Bruce Demarest, and myself.¹⁴ Demarest and I, in our *Integrative Theology*, critically test historical and contemporary theological and philosophical hypotheses on each major topic by their coherence with the relevant data of scriptural teaching. We appeal to both its propositional and its relational language (in the relevance for life and ministry section concluding each chapter). How do the postmodernists like Grenz and Franke justify their proposals without an informative revelation, universal principles of logic or facts? They justify their religious claims by a nebulous “wedding of communitarian and pragmatic insights.”¹⁵

It is not surprising, then, that Grenz, in his extensive *Theology for the Community of God*, fails to teach that what the Bible affirms, God affirms. In his section on “The Bible as Revelation,” Grenz teaches that the Bible is derivative, functional, and mediate revelation, but he does not teach that the Bible *is* revelation.¹⁶ Insofar as postmodernists and others are antipropositional revelation, are they not anti-Christ’s propositional revelations?

In contrast, after a careful, critical study of Jesus’s views of the Old Testament and his anticipation of the New Testament, John W. Wenham concluded, “To Christ the Bible is true, authoritative, inspired. To him the God of the Bible is the living God, and the teaching of the Bible is the teaching of the living God. To him, what Scripture says, God says.”¹⁷

Jesus’s Propositional Revelation and the EPS

What was the response to Jesus’s propositional language by his followers in the first century? He prayed, “For I gave them the words you gave me and *they accepted them*” (John 17:8). Ought not the response of Jesus’s followers in the twenty-first century be similar? What is the response of the Evangelical Philosophical Society today? That remains to be seen. Do EPS members authentically trust Christ if they deny or demean the words God the father gave him?

Trust is essential to enduring and joyful personal relationships in marriages, churches, and scholarly societies. Why did Jesus give his followers God’s words about reality? He explained, “I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them” (John 17:13). Joyful fellowship in the Evangelical Philosophical Society depends on the assent of its officers and members to the truth of the words that God has spoken to us by his Son.

14. *Ibid.*, 14, 15, 37.

15. *Ibid.*, 54.

16. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 516–17.

17. John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1972), 187.

Is it arrogant for EPS members to claim to have received some universal truth by revelation? Members need to remember that the belief in the inerrancy of Jesus's propositions does not entail their own inerrancy. "The Bible *alone*" is God's Word written; it alone is inerrant. It takes humility to follow the evidence of Christ's claims where it leads and bow before all that he affirms. A belief in biblical inerrancy as a product of divine revelation gives its adherents no reason to boast. We have nothing we have not been given by God's grace. Those who place a greater trust in transient theories of language may have a misplaced humility.

EPS members need also clearly to distinguish the words Jesus gave them to interpret from their interpretations. It is important to test our interpretive hypotheses by (1) Christ's threefold criterion of truth, (2) responsible hermeneutical principles, and (3) the exegesis of other responsible Bible students in different cultural contexts in history. We need to accept the interpretive hypothesis that coherently fits all the complex lines of relevant biblical data, with the fewest difficulties. Our Spirit-illuminated conclusions, at best, are beyond reasonable doubt, but we are not Spirit-inspired and inerrant.

The subject of this article is the nature of the revelation given in Christ's words. The debate about propositional revelation is whether our Lord's sentences *per se* have come from God to his one and only Son, or not. Could it be that opponents of propositional revelation have a misplaced humility? They seem to be reticent and even opposed to affirming that God has spoken to us in Christ's divinely revealed propositions. They appear to be less humble when they declare that the Gospel texts are mere constructions of human language games in the early church community. Rather than believing that Jesus's information came from God as he himself taught, they prefer to say it came from the first-century church (as in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* or Grenz's *Theology for the Community of God*).

Can EPS members allege that all Jesus's language is merely the construction of a human community and not contradict his claim that his words came from the Father? Can one deny that Jesus's assertions tell us anything about God's essence and not question Jesus's credibility? Can one demean Jesus's propositions as "static," "cold," and "frozen" and not demean the person who asserted them? Can one be opposed to Jesus's propositional revelation and not thereby be anti-Christ?

The truth of Jesus's divinely revealed propositions is *necessary*, though *not sufficient*, for evangelical spiritual life. True doctrine is necessary to direct our devotion away from counterfeit Messiahs and to the divinely anointed one who alone can save sinners. But the revealed tenets are not *sufficient* without the ministries of the Holy Spirit to overcome our sinful pride and rationalizations. Evangelical philosophers are able to distinguish a necessary from a sufficient condition of authentic spiritual formation.¹⁸

In 1949, there were other scholarly societies that encouraged liberal and neo-orthodox thinkers to join. Then the Evangelical Theological Society was formed for the professional encouragement of scholars who (1) had believed the gospel, repented of their sins, and trusted the living Jesus as Savior and Lord. Also, they (2) believed the assertions of Christ (and all Scripture) *to be* inerrant communications from God. The belief that “What the Bible teaches, God teaches” played a major part in the remarkable resurgence of evangelical schools, publications, churches, and missions in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

If EPS (and ETS) members move to a noninformative view of revelation, the hard-fought present strength of the evangelical churches, missions, publications, schools, and scholarly societies will fade and fall like cut flowers (1 Pet. 1:22–25). Is it not self-contradictory to sign an application that one believes in biblical inerrancy and then disbelieve or discredit Jesus’s divinely revealed propositions? If the officers of the Evangelical Philosophical Society fail to require members to affirm the revealed truth of Christ’s numerous propositions, they oppose the Society’s *raison d’être* and also undercut the conceptual base of evangelical schools and other institutions.

In 1974 at Lausanne, Switzerland, 2,300 evangelicals from 150 countries adopted the Lausanne Covenant declaring that the Bible is “without error in all that it affirms.”

Annually, members of the ETS and the EPS unhypocritically affirm in writing that, “The Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety [including the many propositions that Christ taught], is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.”

Can one distance oneself from teaching the inerrancy of Christ’s propositional revelations and not dishonor him? Other scholarly societies hold out welcome mats for those who imagine that by divine revelation they receive no true information. But there is a much better alternative.

However, I pray that scholars who have been antipositional revelation would reconsider, and humbly assent to the truth of all that their Lord asserted, joyfully sign the EPS doctrinal basis, and support the great cause of evangelical scholarship, with caring relational language for the marginalized in the twenty-first century.

In conclusion, sufficient evidence indicates that Jesus used both relational and propositional terminology. Hence, it is a waste of time and energy for his contemporary disciples to argue for philosophies (or theologies) that are reductively relational or reductively propositional. Rather, let us follow our Savior and Lord by exhibiting in all our thought, teaching, and publica-

18. Further evidence that propositions are necessary though not sufficient for enriching personal relationships with God and others may be found in my, “Is Propositional Revelation Essential to Evangelical Spiritual Formation?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46 (June 2003): 269–98.

tions the consilience of both his relational and his propositional uses of language.

Please join me in prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for having spoken to us in these last days through the effective relationships and true affirmations of your Son. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for lovingly witnessing to the truth the Father gave you, even unto death. Thank you, Spirit of truth, for raising up the members of the Evangelical Philosophical Society to witness, as Jesus did, to loving relational fellowships grounded on loving propositional revelation, even unto death. Amen.