

## F. Confusing language and reality

Virgil Warren, PhD

Since language is based on perception, it expresses a person's subjective viewpoint. Consequently, (a) statements can be made from the way things look more than from the way they really are (phenomenological language). In a related matter, (b) language does not reproduce the whole of the reality it refers to, but only enough to let the hearer know what the speaker is talking about. From previous experience or explanation, a hearer fills in the rest of the picture.

Because of the distinction between words and their referents, biblical interpreters need to use caution lest their discussions with other interpreters end up being nothing but arguments over words (2 Timothy 2:14; 1 Corinthians 2:1-4).

The ecumenical movement involves the error of confusing reality and word. A contentless unity exists largely around a symbol, not a fact, an element of a medium, not around a message. If *Jesus is Lord* is a form to which "Christians" subscribe, they have no unity; Gnostics could have said that. Unity is a reality, not a symbol; so it must be based in reality, not in symbol.

1. Inherent importance does not necessarily correlate with grammatical independence. At best, grammatical dependence-independence reflects the author's emphasis in this instance. We can take two actions and make either one the dependent or independent element: "*I went downtown to buy groceries*" vs. "*When I went downtown, I bought groceries.*" The choice of what is prioritized grammatically may be due to the (a) emphasis a writer makes, (b) how best to connect this sentence with the preceding ones, (c) what else the writer may want to include, or (d) what the conventions of the language allow.

\*\*The fact that "make disciples" is the only finite verb in the Great Commission does not automatically make it the most important thing in the commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Judgment about the most important—or most general—element in the commission comes from the nature of the elements listed.

\*\*One argument against using Acts 2:38 for baptism as connected to the salvation process is based on this discontinuity between grammar and reality (*What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 254-56).

2. The aspect of the verb does not indicate the aspect of the action. Greek uses imperfect and aorist verbs respectively for linear vs. punctiliar (factitive) action. The same difference occurs between present and aorist participles and infinitives, and between the "present" and aorist forms of the optative, subjunctive, and imperative moods. The distinction lies in the ways the speaker looks at the actions, not in the nature of the actions themselves. Linear action does not "take longer" than punctiliar action; any act can be referred to by either verbal "aspect."

\*\*The point can be illustrated by comparing the English simple past and progressive past. "*Yesterday I washed the car.*" "*Yesterday, while I was washing the car, I got a sunburn.*" Both statements refer to the same washing event.

\*\*The fact that "baptizing" is a present rather than aorist participle in the Great Commission does not mean baptizing is itself a process with sub-units, hence, triune

baptism *vs.* single-action baptism. That matter needs to be resolved some other way or left as a matter of opinion.

*\*\*John 11:5, “Jesus loved/was-loving [imperfect/progressive past] Mary and Martha” does not mean his loving them went on longer than if John had said “loved” [aorist/punctiliar].*

3. The amount of attention given to a subject does not necessarily correspond with its inherent importance or theoretical centrality. How much attention an item receives comes from the practical situation as well as from theoretical matters.

4. The same word does not always have the same meaning every time it is used.

One difficulty in overly appealing to “logic” in biblical interpretation stems from the difference between a series of biblical statements and a set of premises in a syllogism. In a syllogism the interpreter assumes that recurring terms carry the same meaning. Most of the difficulty in understanding word communication, however, comes from determining the meaning of terms, which has to occur before any “reasoning in the scripture.”

*\*\*Faith and works* as used in James and Paul do not have the same force, because they appear in different contexts relative to different concerns. Conclusions based on the assumption that they mean the same thing are artificial conclusions. Making them the same in meaning is an example of “equivocating,” putting the same word on two different ideas (maybe even with the intent to deceive).

*\*\*The word judge means “evaluate” as well as “condemn.”* In relation to whether Christians go through the judgment, the answer is “yes” in the sense of evaluation but “no” in the sense of condemnation (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

5. Different words referring to the same thing do not necessarily have exactly the same import. Using different words for the same thing does not make them interchangeable as if they were synonyms. They may be different word pictures for the same referent, highlighting different facets of it or presenting it under different analogies for affective purposes.

*\*\*In different accounts of Jesus’ baptism ἀπό (apo, away from) and ἐκ (ek, out of) may retain their distinctive meanings even though they substitute for each other in the synoptic accounts of Jesus’ baptism.* Either one would serve to translate the Hebrew word נִיחַת that these prepositions may be representing

*\*\*The variation between γνῶσις (gnōsis, knowledge) and ἐπί + γνῶσις (epignōsis, knowledge) in 1 Corinthians 13:12 does not necessarily indicate knowledge *vs.* clear knowledge, another kind of greater knowledge. It can mean knowledge generally and direct personal knowledge.*

*\*\*Systematic theology uses traditional terminology in non-traditional ways.* Such a practice does not necessarily deceive. Retaining terminology while switching the meaning correlates aspects of the previous understanding with the equivalent aspects of the new understanding. In historical theology, for example, “depravity” refers to a biologically

inheritable fallen ontic nature, which renders a person incapable of responding to spiritual matters. It can be used appropriately to mark man's typical sinfulness. In modern theology the expression is often employed to mean man's lower, animal nature. In evolutionary thinking, humankind evolved from that previous, purely animal level. Being depraved, then, refers to refusing to live by the higher nature that has evolved. This kind of depravity replaces the fall with a failure to rise above the "un-advanced-ness."

\*\*Baptism in the name of Jesus does not mean something different from baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Indeed, it could not be incompatible with the other expression without accusing scripture of inconsistency and contradiction.

6. Different words do not necessarily have different referents (*What the Bible Says About Salvation*, p. 342).

Justification, sanctification, reconciliation, regeneration, conversion, salvation. Normally in theological usage "justification" refers to the initial divine act of salvation when God changes the person from one state to another. "Sanctification" refers to growth in the Christian life. The first is categorical (either-or); the second is continuous (a matter of degree). The first is a change of state while the second is an improved condition within the new state. Justification is quantitative; sanctification is qualitative. In scripture, however, these terms usually represent two word-pictures for the same event or two aspects of the same event. Justification views salvation in legal imagery as a pronouncement of acquittal by a judge; sanctification views the event from a relational perspective as a setting aside to a special use or being made holy in a stative sense, in this case an interpersonal relational sense. Taken as a group, do these terms refer to different things or to different facets of the same thing, or are they different models of the same thing?

There is a set of power terms that are not always finely differentiated: κράτος (*kratos*), ισχός (*ischys*), δύναμις (*dynamis*), ἔξουσία (*exousia*). While the last in the list tends to mean "right" vs. physical strength or psychological stamina, the distinctions cannot always be pressed (note John 10:18). "Power" is an example of taking a word already in the language and "bending" it in the direction of the new subject in Christianity. Normally, authority (*έξουσία*), force (*δύναμις*), and might (*κράτος*) speak of impersonal power, but in the Christian setting they can refer to interpersonal power.

Kingdom of heaven vs. kingdom of God are different phrases for the same thing as shown by parallels between Matthew (kingdom of heaven) and the other synoptics (kingdom of God).

#### House of Judah vs. house of Israel

There is a whole set of gift terms that scripture uses somewhat interchangeably: δωρεά (*dōrea*), δώρημα (*dōrēma*), χάρισμα (*charisma*), δῶρον (*dōron*), δόμα (*doma*), χάρις (*charis*), μερισμός (*merismos*), as well as the verbs δίδωμι (*didōmi*), ἀποδίδωμι (*apodidōmi*), διαδίδωμι (*diadidōmi*), μεταδίδωμι (*metadidōmi*), παραδίδωμι (*paradidōmi*), δωρέομαι (*dōreomai*), χαρίζομαι (*charizomai*), and χορηγέω (*chorēgeō*). Romans 5:16 has three different words for gift in the same verse!

*Gift of the Holy Spirit* and *baptism in the Holy Spirit* are both used for the Pentecost event and what happened at the house of Cornelius (Acts 1:5; 11:16-17). "Baptize

in the Spirit" originated with John the Baptist as a terminology adapted from his ministry. Jesus uses that terminology (Acts 1:5) to connect that prediction with his own promise to the apostles regarding Pentecost (Acts 2). Peter uses it to connect Cornelius' household (Gentiles) with Pentecost (Jews). The alternative would be to make baptism in the Holy Spirit more restrictive than gift, but Paul does use it for the Corinthians generally (1 Corinthians 12:13). Likewise, in John's original promise, he is speaking to a general audience. Consequently, baptism in the Holy Spirit does not apply just to the apostles. It does not apply only to a gift of the Spirit that involves supernatural gifting unless an interpreter is prepared to say that every Christian has a supernatural gift.

*Image* and *likeness* are probably two word pictures for virtually the same thing in Genesis 1:26-27.

The "poor and needy" (*πτωχὸς καὶ πένης*, *ptōchos kai penēs*) are paired fourteen times in the Septuagint, as pleonastic references to the same ones (hendiadys).

## 7. Lists need to be handled carefully in relation to their referents.

a. Lists are not necessarily parallel. The number of words does not necessarily equal the number of realities—reification. They may overlap; they may represent a series of different word pictures for the same thing (cp. "good morning, friends and neighbors"; *στέγω* (*stegō*) and *ὑπομένω* (*hypomenō*) in 1 Corinthians 13:7; cp. Paul as a herald, apostle, and teacher in 2 Timothy 1:11). Since reality itself has a hierarchical nature, language also is hierarchical; so lists may have some terms that fit with another. Besides, language sometimes employs pleonasm for emphasis (various and sundry).

\*\*"Image" and "likeness" may not mean two different things in Genesis 1:26.

\*\*Acts 10:46 ("*speaking in tongues and magnifying God*") probably means magnifying God in the tongue speaking. Acts 19:16 ("*speaking in tongues and prophesying*") probably means that in tongues the prophesying was taking place. Both passages in Acts are evidently composites ("hendiadys"), because Peter on Pentecost identifies the tongue speaking with the prediction that people would prophesy (2:4 + 18 < Joel 2:29).

\*\*Are the four verb ideas in the Great Commission parallel in sequence or are going, teaching, and baptizing simply subunits of making disciples?

\*\*"*Tell his disciples and Peter*" (Mark 16:7).

\*\*Acts 9:41 speaks of saints and widows ("widows" could refer to non-Christian mourners, however).

\*\*1 Corinthians 9:5-6 is neither parallel nor homogeneous: "we" (Paul, Sosthenes, Barnabas), the rest of the apostles, the brothers of the Lord, Cephas.

\*\*1 Corinthians 12:10 lists both prophesying and language speaking as gifts. This does not mean necessarily that the two are parallel items. Prophesying is a larger category that a person may have as a gift; language speaking is an ability to speak in a language not learned. It could be used to convey prophecy, but it would not be limited to it.

\*\*Is "love" mentioned first in the fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) because the others are (a) aspects of it, (b) produced by it, or (c) it is most important? Galatians 5:22-23 puts *love* first while 2 Peter 1:5-7 puts it last.

\*\*In Philippians 2:1, are the several words all different ideas or different word pictures for much the same thing or related things: consolation, fellowship, affection, compassion?

\*\*“. . . may your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire . . . at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

\*\*“If the righteous scarcely be saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?” (1 Peter 4:18); compare then 2 Thessalonians 1:8: “. . . taking vengeance on them that do not know God and that do not obey the gospel” in relation to whether the unevangelized are automatically lost.

\*\*1 Thessalonians 5:23 may not teach the tripartite nature of humankind just because three words are listed together (body, soul, and spirit).

\*\*1 Timothy 2:12 probably means teaching authoritatively.

\*\*“Lovers of self” in 2 Timothy 3:2 heads a list of vices that could be considered sub-units of this basic mentality.

\*\*Hebrews 12:1 calls for laying aside the weight and the sin that so easily besets us. “Weight” could refer to what holds us back—things not bad in themselves (entertainment, misplaced loyalties, materialism)—while “sin” could mean disobedience; but there is no way to be sure that is a distinction the Hebrew writer meant.

### b. Lists are not necessarily sequential.

Lists provide one example of the old fallacy *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (“after this; therefore because of this”). The fallacy usually describes temporal sequence misread as causal connection. Lists may be sequential, but the sequence in the list does not have to correlate with some kind of sequence. Lists may be partially sequential, as with the ten commandments, where the first item seems prior to the rest without the rest being in some order. The same may apply to spiritual fruits in Galatians 6:22-23, where love appears first.

\*\*Matthew 18:15-22: procedure for dealing with disagreement between believers

\*\*Acts 15:20, 29 have the same list in different orders.

\*\*Romans 5:3-5: “tribulation works steadfastness . . . works approvalness . . . works hope, which does not put to shame.” (cp. 2 Peter 1:5-7 below)

\*\*Romans 8:29-30: foreknow, foreordain, call, justify, and glorify

\*\*Romans 12:6-8 lists prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, ruling showing mercy.

\*\*Romans 12:9ff. gives a virtue list.

\*\*“. . . but you were washed . . . sanctified . . . justified” (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Does Acts 2:42 represent a divine order of service?

In Galatians 5:22, does *love* appear first because it is most important, because it generates the rest, because it includes the rest?

Is there any significance to the fact that Mark 1:15 commands repentance and belief in that order instead of the opposite, normal sequence? Why does sanctification of

the spirit precede belief in 2 Thessalonians 2:13? In successive verses Romans 10:9-10 lists confession and faith in opposite orders. Are the beatitudes in Matthew 5 in a specific order?

\*\*1 Timothy 4:16 (“*Take heed to yourself and to your ministry*”) may be sequential.

(1) Lists are not necessarily in logical order.

\*\*James 3:17? “*first pure, then peaceable*”

\*\*Hebrews 7:2? “*first king of righteousness, then king of peace*”

\*\*The difference between Calvinistic and Arminian interpretation of the *ordo salutis* in Romans 8:29-30 lies in reading it as a logical vs. chronological sequence respectively.

\*\*Some read the verbals in the Great Commission as parallel and sequential both logically and chronologically. Evangelicals generally, however, take “make disciples” as the general activity with going, baptizing, and teaching as aspects within it.

(2) Lists are not necessarily in chronological order.

\*\*The Parable of the Tares does not argue for amillennialism just because in Matthew 13:30 the landowner tells the servants to gather up first the tares and burn them and then gather the wheat into the barn. Is the point “first in time” or “the first thing I am telling you”? Is it first in the kind of thing harvesting involves or first in the message the parable is picturing?

\*\*In the accounts of the institution is there any importance to be attached to the fact that Jesus deals with the loaf first and then the cup (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25)?

\*\*Romans 10:14-15 evidently has a reverse chronological series in calling on God, believing on him, hearing from him, preaching about him, and being sent to preach.

(3) Lists are not necessarily in the order of importance—either ascending or descending.

In Acts 18:26 listing Priscilla before Aquila does not necessarily make Priscilla more forceful than her husband (contrast 18:2-3); assonance is a better explanation.

\*\*1 Corinthians 13:13 (faith, hope, love)

\*\*In 1 Corinthians 12:30 speaking in languages and interpreting languages are listed last. That does not make them least important. If a reason needs to be found for placing these two items where he does, perhaps Paul put them at the end because he intended to deal with them particularly in the following context.

\*\*in Ephesians 4:11 the order of *prophet* given before *pastor* is sometimes used to argue that the evangelist has a right to appoint the elders.

(4) Lists are not necessarily in directional order.

\*\*In Jacob's dream the angels were ascending and descending. (Were they on earth first? [Genesis 28:12; John 1:51]). Even in English people say "up and down" to mean vertically back and forth, not to imply that going up happens first.

\*\*The fig tree withered from the roots up (therefore, a divine act?).

\*\*The temple veil tore from top to bottom (as God would tear it?).

\*\*Does the fact that 1 Corinthians 12:30 mentions languages and interpretation of languages last imply that they are least (cp. hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold in Matthew 13:23)?

- (5) Lists are not necessarily inclusive to included or *vice versa* (in a set of concentric circles).

c. Lists are not necessarily exhaustive.

Lists may be representative rather than exhaustive.

\*\*Acts 2:38 does not mention belief and confession.

\*\*The fact that music is never listed among the gifts does not mean it must be considered a "tool."

\*\*Deacons are not mentioned in the list of gifts in Ephesians 4:11.

\*\*Note in general the difference in the gifts lists (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:28-30; Ephesians 4:11)

\*\*Note the difference in the virtue lists (Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Peter 1:5-7)

\*\*Note the difference in the vice lists.

d. Lists are not necessarily homogeneous.

\*\*Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25 may represent a combination of moral principles and social expediencies. Interpreters, however, may take πορνεία (*porneia*) as incest.

\*\*Do 1 Timothy 3:2-12 and Titus 1:6-9 combine necessity (moral requirement) and advice (expediency)?

\*\*The items in the list in Genesis 3:14-19 do not all have to be punishments and therefore different from the unfallen condition. At stake is the misuse of 3:16d as a characteristic of fallen mankind and therefore not true of redeemed people (contrast 1 Corinthians 7:34).

\*\*The list of household teachings under "submit yourselves to one another" (Ephesians 5:21-6:9) is not entirely homogeneous. Slavery and childhood are not the same kind of thing; but they do have the common element of submission, though for different reasons.

\*\*Galatians 3:28 lists bond and free, male and female, Jew and Greek because all three o sets share the fact that one member in each pair was not an heir under Mosaism or even the Abrahamic covenant.

\*\*1 Corinthians 13 (Faith, hope, and love are not parallel, sequential, or exhaustive.)

- e. Lists do involve parts of some larger common category or have some common element that causes an author to put them together—at least for present purposes.

**Lists appear in many passages: Matthew 10:8; Romans 9:4-5**

Whether lists are parallel, sequential, exhaustive, or homogeneous is determined by an examination of the referents themselves and by other factors besides the sheer fact that an author put them in the same set.

#### 8. The form of a statement must be distinguished from the reality of the referent.

\*\*Leviticus 10:1 says that Nadab and Abihu offended God by offering strange fire that he had not commanded them to offer. The statement is in the form of silence, but the real situation was one of prohibition because Exodus 30:9 expressly prohibited what in Leviticus is worded as a silence statement. Non-instrumentalists use the Nadab and Abihu incident to illustrate the principle that silence in matters of worship equals prohibition, but that usage plays on the form of the statement rather than on the reality of the situation and the nature of the case. This illustration also shows the importance of not trying to use narrative material for a doctrinal point since the logical connectors and motivations involved are not always evident from an account.

\*\*The objection is raised by some that people should not say, “*I feel such and such,*” but “*I think such and such.*” “Feel” is taken to mean an emotional impression rather than a thought-out conclusion. The reason for using the word feel, however, does not reflect an affective orientation instead of a cognitive one; feel softens the statement so as not to “fly in the face” of someone while discussing a sensitive point. It is comparable to saying “*I think such and such is true*” instead of saying “*This is true.*”

\*\*It has been argued that the term διαθήκη (*diathēkē*) means “covenant,” not “testament,” because a covenant involves the agreement of both parties. It may be true that in salvation both parties are involved, but a model does not have to correspond to everything in the reality. “Testament” gets at the idea of one person’s willing to another what the other has not earned; it is clearly so used in Hebrews 9:15-22. Whether the other person has a part in willingness to receive or in meeting conditions to receive lies beyond the figure’s capacity to communicate.

\*\*Some preachers have commented on John 11:43 by saying, “*If Jesus had not said ‘Lazarus,’ in the command ‘Lazarus, come forth,’ all the tombs would have been emptied.*” Such a notion confuses language and reality. Jesus would have meant Lazarus, regardless of whether he verbalized the point or not. (Besides, the imperative form in the Greek is singular! Preachers should not try to be spectacular.)

#### 9. Several problems come from making propositions ultimate, that is, from not making the language-referent distinction.

a. It depersonalizes God in the eyes of his people. That, in turn, creates inadequate attitudes toward God.

b. Propositions are inflexible. They do not take attitude into consideration and foster the impulse to disallow new considerations beyond their purview.

c. Propositions are partial. Since they do not reproduce all the reality they point to, they do not tell the reader many things he might like to know.

d. Propositions may be misunderstood even when people hear the revelation.

e. Propositions seem manageable. People can say the words or not; they can believe them or not; they can apply them or not; they can twist them to mean what they want. Realities cannot be made other than what they are.

10. Confusing figure and fact, container and contents, medium and message, which is a problem encountered in interpreting all figures of speech