

## LANGUAGE AND FAITH

by Dalton Reimer\*

*"Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?'" —John 3:4*

Incomprehension is the consequence of transforming intended figurative meanings into literal meanings. Hence the perplexity of Nicodemus. Conflicting modes of thought and language are present in this segment from Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus. The burden of this essay is to examine these modes, particularly as they pertain to the communication of our Christian faith.

My concern with language is not new. Much of theological controversy through the ages has at bottom been rooted in disagreements over the nature of language. I make no attempt here to weave a path through the intricacies of these historical arguments, though what I have to say will pertain at points to positions which have been both supported and attacked. My interest is to explore the phenomenon of language as part of God's created order, which is governed by natural laws which He has instituted, and to examine how, within this natural sphere, it is possible to speak meaningfully of that other order which we call the supernatural sphere.

### I. LANGUAGE AND MEANING.

In an 18th century political address, "Sunbeams May be Extracted from Cucumbers, but the Process is Tedious," David Daggett, New England lawyer and gentleman of wit, tells the story of a grand academy in Lagado, in Laputa, inhabited by some curious gentlemen of learning. Among them was a scholar who was convinced that speaking was injurious to the lungs and hence contributed to the shortening of men's lives and so had devised a plan to abolish words. Since words are only names for things, he contended, it would be advantageous to the health of all men if they would converse through the exchange of things rather than the exchange of words. Men were subsequently seen carrying in packs on their backs those objects essential to the particular purpose of their conversation. When two sages of the time would meet, they would untie their packs and converse for a period of time through the exchange of objects; whereupon they would assist each other in resuming their burdens and take their leave.

Needless to say, our vocabularies would be severely limited if we would follow the advice of this scholar of Lagado. For were we to gather in packs all that which we speak of, we would literally bear oceans and continents, indeed the sun and the moon and the stars, on our backs. Yet, precisely because words are only names for things, it is possible for us to manage these loads through language.

Words, then, are signs of the realities they signify. But words signify realities in different ways. Words, at their simplest, take on the characteristic of pointing. When we wish to teach a child the word for a round object which sometimes bounces and which can be thrown, we hold that

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object in our hand, point to it, and say "ball." The child soon learns to associate the sounds of "ball" with the object it signifies. Once having learned this association, he is able to call for "ball" even in its absence. Through words he now is able to handle realities beyond his immediate presence, though rooted in previous experience. But he is still at the pointing stage. "Ball" still means that round object which sometimes bounces and which can be thrown, whether the ball is actually present or not. The meanings arising out of this direct relationship between words and realities have been referred to variously as sign meanings, steno-meanings, or literal meanings.

But the child has yet to master another level of language. For after awhile he hears his father pronouncing in stern tones, "It's about time you get on the ball." Such pronouncements can be quite baffling! For surely his father does not mean that he is to climb on the ball and stand on it. Certainly he means this no more than Jesus meant by being born anew that Nicodemus should return in old age to his mother's womb once again to be born. Father now means something more complex than can be suggested by simply pointing to the ball. The meaning now transcends the literal. The child must now enter the mysteries of metaphor.

The children's book, *Just Only John*, cleverly illustrates the nature of metaphor. The young boy John, wondering what it would be like to be something other than what he is, eats a penny magic spell which turns him into whatever is mentioned in his presence. Thus, when his mother greets him upon his return home with the question, "Where has my little lamb been?" he promptly turns into a lamb. When, in surprise, she exclaims, "What happened to you, Bunny?" he proceeds to turn into a bunny. When later she reprimands him for his messy eating habits with the words, "Why must you be such a little pig?" he, of course, turns into a pig. Such are the transformations which take place when we change metaphorical meanings into literal meanings.

How, then, might we think of metaphor? Definitions of this action of language have been offered throughout history. Aristotle views metaphor as "an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars" and proclaims that "the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor."<sup>1</sup> The Roman author of *Ad Herennium* suggests that "metaphor occurs when a word applying to one thing is transferred to another, because the similarity seems to justify this transference."<sup>2</sup> The early English rhetorician, Thomas Wilson, explains: "Metaphor is an alteration of a word from the proper and natural meaning, to that which is not proper, and yet agreed thereunto, by some likeness that appeareth to be in it."<sup>3</sup> The contemporary rhetorician, Kenneth Burke, says, "Metaphor is a device for seeing something **in terms of** something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this."<sup>4</sup>

A metaphor, states I.A. Richards, consists of two parts, a "vehicle" and a "tenor." The vehicle is the particular word that is chosen to convey the meaning. In our previous example, "It's about time you get on the ball," the vehicle is "ball." The tenor refers to that meaning other than the literal meaning which we now give to "ball." In another phrase, "Jesus is the bread of life," "bread" serves as the vehicle to communicate a tenor which is certainly different from physical bread. Quite obviously, Jesus is not to be actually eaten as we would eat a loaf of bread. "If we cannot distinguish tenor from vehicle then we may provisionally take the

word to be literal," says I.A. Richards, whereas "if we can distinguish at least two co-operating uses, then we have metaphor."<sup>5</sup>

Metaphor, it should be understood, cannot be exorcised from our speech without severely limiting what we can talk about. Metaphor is more than a part of speech we add if we wish color and fire. For we find that we cannot speak very many words without metaphor creeping in unawares. Metaphor lies at the very core of our language rather than at the fringe. Indeed, C.S. Lewis proposes the rule: "the meaning in any given composition is in inverse ratio to the author's belief in his own literalness."<sup>6</sup>

A brief examination of a few characteristic uses of metaphor will quickly reveal the pervasive presence of metaphor in our speaking. As we examine these statements, we will perhaps note the difficulty of stating the same meanings in literal terms. If we have doubts as to whether the following are indeed metaphors, we then may ask ourselves what we would observe or do if we would treat these statements literally. Consider, then, the following examples of what we might call directional metaphors: "He is **climbing up** the social **ladder**." "Everything **fell through**." "We received an **icy** reception." Or, depth metaphors: "He is a **shallow** person." "Man, that's **deep**." Or, life metaphors: "The motion **died** for want of a second." "A new nation was **born**." Or, the frequently used health metaphors: "Our society is **sick**." "The corporation is **healthy**." And the list is unending.

Words clearly do not only serve as signs to point to realities in a literal sense. Words may also be metaphors, serving as vehicles which transport us beyond the literal sense to new tenor meanings. We have, then, two modes of language, the literal and the metaphorical. It is these two fundamental modes which stand in opposition to each other in that brief segment of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus with which we began.

## II. METAPHOR AND THOUGHT.

Now, thought itself is metaphoric, says I.A. Richards, and "proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom."<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, whose comments on metaphor are among the earliest in history, already understood that metaphor is something more than a mere stylistic figure of speech. Metaphor is essential to thought itself. Through metaphor new knowledge becomes possible. For metaphor, as Aristotle has been interpreted to say, stands as the "mean between the extremes of the unintelligible and the commonplace. We already know commonplace words, and we can learn nothing from completely unknown words; but from words with which we already associate some meaning we can get a new insight into the nature of some object or action."<sup>8</sup> Thus, familiar vehicles transport us in the direction of new tenor meanings.

How, then, might we speak of God? We cannot teach the meaning of God by pointing and saying "God" as we might teach the meaning of "ball" to a child. What would we point to? The reality of God, clearly, is of a different order from the reality of "ball." God is not experienced in the same way that we experience "ball." Literal language, then, falls short of reaching God. Meanings are required that somehow transcend the literal meanings of our sensory world. But we are prisoners of earth and our understandings reflect our experiences in this prison. No one has seen God, as the Scriptures say. And we cannot travel except in vehicles familiar to us and which we know how to handle. So we do the only thing

we can do under the circumstances. We place a familiar vehicle in juxtaposition to that which is beyond and unknown and through that juxtaposition arrive at new tenor meanings. God, thus, is placed in juxtaposition to father, and so we arrive at a new tenor meaning of God. He is like a father. Or, God is placed in juxtaposition to shepherd, and so we arrive at another tenor meaning of God. He is like a shepherd. Likewise He is also a Judge, Vinedresser, Master, Lord, King, and Creator. In the case of each vehicle, understanding is possible because of human experience with earthly judges, shepherds, vinedressers, masters, lords, kings, and creators. But this is not to say that our conception of God is limited to our perception of the behavior of these earthly possessors of these roles. Dorothy Sayers puts the point well:

“When we use these expressions, we know perfectly well that they are metaphors and analogies; what is more, we know perfectly well where the metaphor begins and ends. We do not suppose for one moment that God procreates children in the same manner as a human father and we are quite well aware that preachers who use the ‘father’ metaphor intend and expect no such perverse interpretation of their language. Nor (unless we are very stupid indeed) do we go on to deduce from the analogy that we are to imagine God as being a cruel, careless or injudicious father such as we may see from time to time in daily life; still less, that all activities of a human father may be attributed to God, such as earning money for the support of the family or demanding the first use of the bathroom in the morning. Our own common sense assures us that the metaphor is intended to be drawn from the best kind of father acting within a certain limited sphere of behavior, and is to be applied only to a well-defined number of the divine attributes.”<sup>9</sup>

Even good fathers do not adequately encompass the meaning of God the Father. Jesus Himself makes the point:

Or what man of you, if his sons asks him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or, if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?<sup>10</sup>

Vehicles, then, are suggestive, but not limiting. After every metaphor of God, though essential to understanding, must be added the words, “how much more.” And after all the possibilities of metaphor have been exhausted, God has not been exhausted, for no language is able to contain God. Yet, we cannot begin to understand God without familiar vehicles which transport us into the eternal sphere.

But God, in all His wisdom, has shown us a better way. For He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. The incarnation is at heart an act of metaphor. The “Word” has become flesh. Through the vehicle of Jesus we understand the tenor meaning of God. Indeed, the incarnation serves as the model for all acts of communication of Christian truth. Unless Christian truth comes in the form of man, in terms of vehicles which are comprehensible by virtue of being familiar, new tenor meanings are not possible. Through familiar vehicles, then, and principally through Him who assumed the form of man, it is possible for us to transcend the limitations of our experience and enter into the meanings of that eternal sphere in

which God is Lord. But until such time as we shall enter our eternal rest and experience directly that eternal sphere, we shall remain dependent on earthly vehicles to transport us into that eternal realm. Our understanding will be dependent on metaphor.

Jesus, the Master, was fully cognizant of this dependence on common vehicles to communicate the truths of the Kingdom. Metaphor was his method, both in the shortened form of the quick comparison and in the extended form of parable. It is thus no accident, nor simply a matter of convenience, that Jesus used the method of metaphor to communicate. If, indeed, He wished to communicate, He had no choice but to use metaphor. We glimpse His mode of thought in the Gospel record where we hear Him asking: "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it?"<sup>11</sup> Or, having found the clue, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to . . ." <sup>12</sup> The way of metaphor, Jesus understood, is the pathway to communicating supernatural truths.

### III. MASTERS AND PUPILS.

C.S. Lewis, in his insightful essay on metaphor entitled "Bluspels and Flalansferes" has distinguished between the "master's metaphor" and the "pupil's metaphor."<sup>13</sup> Understanding these two types of metaphor is helpful in further revealing the nature of the relationship between language and faith.

The distinction between the master's metaphor and the pupil's metaphor rests upon the difference in the relationship between the knower and that which is known. In the case of the master's metaphor, the master deliberately chooses metaphor to communicate that which he has directly experienced. Metaphor in this case is a means for communication, for the knowledge which the master possesses is independent of his comprehension of the metaphor. His knowledge is based on actual first-hand acquaintance. The pupil's metaphor, in contrast, points to the situation in which understanding is limited to the pupil's comprehension of the metaphor. The pupil has had no first-hand experience with that which the metaphor speaks of. Thus, when we hear that Robert, whom we have never met, is a cold person, our knowledge of Robert is limited to our comprehension of the metaphor "cold." We are then in the position of the pupil. But if, knowing Robert, we communicate to others that he is a cold person, we are in the position of the master deliberately choosing to communicate through this particular metaphor that which we have directly experienced. Our knowledge is then not limited by metaphor.

Some things, C.S. Lewis observes, we know only by metaphor. For one, the sheer magnitude of that which we might experience in this life is such that we will never experience directly all that we could. And "when we speak about something of which we have no direct experience," writes Dorothy Sayers, "we must think by analogy or refrain from thought."<sup>14</sup> But realities also exist that cannot be directly experienced. And such is the reality of God. And because God cannot be experienced in the same way that we experience persons and realities in the natural realm, we occupy the position of the pupil and not the master. Indeed, it is impossible for us to preempt the position of the master. For we have not seen and cannot see God in a literal sense.

Where we must remain pupils, C.S. Lewis further observes, realities are more fully comprehended if known by many metaphors than if known only by a single metaphor. The Scriptures are impressive in verifying this

principle. For in speaking of God, we have already noted that He is known not only as Father, but also as Judge, Shepherd, Vinedresser, Master, Lord, Love, King, and Creator. As pupils our understanding is immeasurably increased by the rich diversity of metaphors which have been used to reveal the mystery of God. And all of these metaphors are overshadowed by that supreme and unparalleled metaphor of Jesus Christ Himself.

#### IV. GOD AND PERSONS.

The metaphors prominent in the language of persons and cultures betray the values of those persons and cultures. In contemporary education, for example, it has become customary to speak of learning as a "process" and the graduate of an institution as a "product." "Process" and "product" are, of course, metaphors when applied to persons. For these terms literally mean something which happens to things as they move along a conveyer belt in a factory. They are terms important to a technological culture. But we have come also to think of people as things, and so we now "process people" and produce "products" of various kinds of institutions.

The metaphors used in Scripture to speak of God are basically personal metaphors drawn from the arena of human relationships. He is best understood through the vehicle of such human relationships as that between Father and child, Judge and defendant, Master and slave, Lord and servant, King and subject, or Creator and created. The Christian faith is at heart personal. Perhaps the relationship between two lovers best illustrates the intensity of the commitment which God seeks. For God calls man to that fervor and love experienced by a bride and bridegroom.

Our search for vehicles which will lead contemporary man to new tenor meanings of God, then, must be conducted predominantly in the arena of human relationships. For the knowledge of God is indeed of the nature of the knowledge of persons. So that in reflecting on the nature of the relationship between husband and wife, parent and child, bride and bridegroom, teacher and student, and leader and follower, we come to understand something of the nature of God.

We also must guard against the depersonalization of language evident in our culture. It is easy to drag the current metaphors into the church. The words of productivity, such as process, product, efficient, progress, business meeting, and others, are so pervasive in our language that we hardly recognize them for what they are, yet they subtly contribute to the depersonalization of our relationships. Jesus once drove out of the temple those who had dragged the market place into God's presence. Is it possible that the market place has returned to the temple and we have not recognized its presence?

#### V. METAPHOR AND ANALYSIS.

The centrality of metaphor in the ministry of Jesus stands in sharp contrast to our dominant mode of communication. We have inherited a cultural tradition in the Western world which has emphasized analytical forms of communication. Under the influence of this culture, our predominant tendency in church communication, both in pulpit preaching and church school teaching, has been to analyse, to take apart. Our route to understanding tends to be through several points, if no longer through the proverbial three. These points tend to represent parts of a whole, which is the characteristic pattern of analysis. We rarely experience even

such poetic forms as the Psalms without having to endure the exercise of taking them apart and explaining what each line or phrase means, as though they are incapable of carrying the meaning themselves. Even the parables of Jesus, originally embodying the message in the story itself, we now encounter principally through analysis. Whereas metaphor was the method of Jesus, our method has become that of analysis.

In the matter of the interpretation of Scripture, we must ask whether faithfulness to form is required as well as faithfulness to content. We tend to respond to the rich diversity of forms in Scripture with a single form, that of analysis. Whether poetry, drama, song, psalm, parable, letter, or revelation, we reduce all to analysis. Is it possible that old metaphor and old parable can be interpreted by new metaphor and new parable rather than merely through analysis? And I am not speaking here of the mere use of illustration and example in support of an analytical point. Jesus' parables, Amos Wilder observes, are centrally revelatory in character, their purpose is not to exemplify but to reveal. Indeed, as Wilder quotes Gunther Bornkamm, "The parables are the preaching itself."<sup>15</sup>

If we follow the method of Jesus, then, the question He posed in His search for vehicles will frequently be on our lips, "With what can we compare . . . ?" Perhaps this question should precede in importance the question of analysis, "Into what points shall I divide . . . ?" For analysis indeed leads to division, metaphor to synthesis. Each path may lead to understanding, though differently. In analysis we take apart. In metaphor we consummate a marriage of the strange and the familiar giving birth to new truths in a burst of energy and insight. Instead of the partialness of analysis, the experience of metaphor is immediately holistic, transporting us beyond the limits of the literal and revealing truth beyond our immediate experience. Good metaphor strikes with the brilliance of lightning, illuminating in an instant that which is deep and hidden.

## VI. CONCLUSION.

Through metaphor, then, we come to understand the mysteries of God. But metaphor, as all language, is of the nature of earthen vessels, useful, to be sure, but marred by the imperfections that mark all man's creations. Language, therefore, together with all of man's works, will ultimately come under the judgment of God. Let us then not be guilty of idolatry by giving language an absoluteness which it does not possess. Words, when inspired by God, are sufficient to lead men into the Kingdom. But we see through a glass darkly. We stand in awe and reverence as pupils in the presence of the grandeur and mystery of the Master. "But we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."

## FOOTNOTES:

1. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1459a.
  2. *Ad Herennium*, XXXIV.
  3. Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rheotorique*, (Scholars' Facsimilies, 1962), p. 194.
  4. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Prentice-Hall, 1950), pp. 503-504.
  5. I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford U. Press, 1964), p. 119.
  6. C. S. Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes" in Dudley Baily, *Essays on Rhetoric* (Oxford U. Press, 1965), pp. 204-216.
  7. Richard, p. 94.
  8. George Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton U. Press, 1963), p. 112.
  9. Dorothy Sayers, *Christian Letters o a Post-Christian World* (Eerdmans, 1969), p. 102.
  10. Matthew 6:9-11.
  11. Mark 4:30.
  12. Mathew 13:24.
  13. Lewis, "Bluspels . . ."
  14. Sayers, p. 101.
  15. Amos N. Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel* (Harper and Row, 1964), p. 80.
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