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Foreword by Vern S. Poythress

The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior

*A Reformed Exposition of the Language
Theory of Kenneth L. Pike*

REFORMED ACADEMIC DISSERTATIONS

Foreword

I am excited to see this book bring together two figures that up to now have usually not been considered together—the linguist and Bible translator Kenneth L. Pike and the Reformed apologist and theologian Cornelius Van Til. Kenneth Pike was a devoted Christian and a brilliant linguist. He offered a genuinely Christian and Trinitarian approach to language. But secular linguistic theory was moving in other directions as his theory blossomed and grew, and within his lifetime his work seldom received the attention that it deserved within the broader academic community. To some extent, analogous things might be said of Cornelius Van Til. During his lifetime he was appreciated by his students, but received a good deal of misunderstanding, rejection, and neglect from the broader community in philosophy, theology, and apologetics. In my opinion, both of these men were too radical, too penetrating, too innovative in a good sense to be immediately embraced. They were swimming against the tide.

These two men were not just contrarian. Primarily they were following in the path of loyalty to God and to their Savior Jesus Christ. They both in their ways appreciated the centrality of the Trinity and the centrality of the personal character of God. For Van Til, the centrality of God led to the centrality of human beings made in the image of God, and the centrality of human loyalty either to God or to man as a substitute god. That orientation of mankind toward loyalty or disloyalty made all the difference in apologetics. For Pike, the centrality of God led to the centrality of language—particularly the language of the Bible—and the centrality of human

FOREWORD

beings as language users. For both thinkers, God, the true God of the Bible, was absolutely central. But in addition, human beings as full persons were indispensable to their fields of study. Van Til had human commitments of the heart squarely at the heart of his apologetics. Pike had human interaction with God and man squarely at the heart of his theory of language.

Both Pike and Van Til were deeply affected by the Trinitarian character of God. For Van Til, the centrality of God meant centrality of the true God, who is one God in three persons. Apologetics should not defend a bare monotheism, not further defined, but should defend the God who is, the God who is Trinitarian. For Pike, the centrality of persons led to triads of perspectives reflecting the Trinity. For Pike, language was not a bare abstract, but the gift of God. And that God, as the Trinitarian God, reflected his Trinitarian nature in the very structure of language. The affinities between Van Til and Pike are fascinating. Now we have before us a book that expounds those affinities. We are blessed by its insights.

The fruits arising from these affinities may be many. Among them I would suggest two for further attention.

First, the secular world is spinning out sophisticated but reductionistic, inadequate views of language. If we are Christians, we need something more robust than mere rejection, mere reaction. And we need to exercise more critical discernment than we show if we merely follow the latest philosophical or literary fads, with small attempts at identifying problems and adjusting to them. We need to ask positively about how language fits into a Christian worldview. Van Til supplies the Christian worldview directly, while Pike supplies the robust, anti-reductionistic view of language within that worldview.

Second, because language is central to human living, a number of secular visionaries are exploring how to find our way in human living through sustained exploration of the nature of language. In the minds of these visionaries, everything is “interpretation.” We can profit from a Christian analogue to such exploration of

FOREWORD

language. And Hibbs's book gives us a beginning and a foundation, by expounding the significance of Kenneth L. Pike to the larger world—not only the linguistic world, but the world of theology and human life.

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