



C.S. LEWIS STUDY CENTER
RENEW · REFRESH · REDEEM

Awake. Love. Think. Speak: Language, Ikon, and Creativity in a Discordant World

June 15-17, 2022

Theme Statement by Dr. Scott B. Key

*At the climax of the multi-layered melodious account of the creation of Narnia, Aslan pauses, and breathes into his work. With his wondrously life-giving voice, deep and wild as it soars above the silence of that moment, he speaks: “Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters.” Each of these words is essential. The interpretive vision of creation presented by Lewis here in *The Magician’s Nephew* points to deep Biblical themes that can inform our creative and faithful response to the complex needs we face as people of God. We are called by a loving and creative God to imaginatively live as people of the Kingdom. We are called to allow the Holy Spirit to teach us how to love like Jesus loved. We are challenged to be transformed by the renewing of our minds or thinking. We are called to bear witness to truth in Spirit-shaped ways that display God’s transformative love through Christ who is both Word and Ikon. If this is our calling in Christ, then it is necessary to think and dialogue creatively about word and image in the context of a culture filled with conflicting visions and discordant voices. What follows is a suggestion. It is an effort to “frame” and guide a discussion on these important and challenging themes as we approach the June 2022 conference at the C. S. Lewis Study Center.*

Introduction: Have you ever thought about how you would teach a very intelligent, cogent, and self-aware fish about water? It would be a real challenge. So, it is for us to think about the phenomena of language. In many respects we, as human beings, live in language. We are surrounded by language from the moment of our conception to the moment of our physical death. There are many other aspects to our life, but language is present all the time. Perhaps this strange question will cause us to

think about how wondrous and mysterious it is that St. John begins his proclamation of the Good News by stating that the “Word,” the “Logos,” the “Word-Deed,” the “Rational Structure of the Universe,” the “Creative Word of God,” the second person of the Holy Trinity came to us, became flesh and blood, and “pitched his tent’ in our midst. This “Word” and these “words” astound us.

In the same way that we are surrounded by language, we live within a kaleidoscope of shapes, colors, and images reflective of a living inner and outer world that stimulates our imagination, creativity, and the desire to meaningfully interpret the experience of the world. This is the power of image. The Greek word is “ikon.” The power of ikon or image is sometimes overwhelming. Our inner world of thought, dreams, visions, and images both illumines and distorts our quest for meaning. The outer world of nature, other humans, cultural life, and artifacts simultaneously reflect our sense of identity and help create our sense of identity. We are often filled with wonder. We “stretch out to know” the “world” we encounter using all our senses. In this way, we shape and form the images of our lives. Within this kaleidoscope we may be shocked to hear the word: “He (Jesus Christ) is the ikon of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:15- 17 ESV). We are astounded once again.

Logos and ikon, word and image, are two profound metaphors that open to us the depth of the New Testament witness to the incarnation of Christ: word and ikon in-fleshed in our midst. He is the means through whom God created all things and sustains all things. Word and ikon are the means by which we frail humans shape and fashion our world as “sub-creators” mimicking God’s creativity. How do these three realities tie together: word, image, and creativity? How are they related to the Good, the True, and the Beautiful? How do we communicate our wonder? How do we interpret our world? How do we exercise our imagination for the sake of human flourishing? How can our deeply imbedded desire to create in word and ikon be harnessed for good?

This conference is designed to challenge us to think about language, meaning, creativity, and the deep mystery to which these words point. This theme is bound to be hard to “articulate” and “grasp.” Our words fail us even as we experience the deep failure of words and the distorted meaning of our culture. We hang onto, as we should, words that have come to reveal deep meaning to us about the human condition, about the nature of reality, and about the one true God who created us for His joyous purpose. We struggle. We encounter the Word in and through words infused with spiritual power and

authority. We join together to ponder the Word with words. We seek, pursue, and long to dance together with meaning. We grieve that our world is so broken and so many of our friends are living without meaning. And, we are confused by the ways in which language is used to divide, to hurt, to coerce, to entrap, and to destroy. We wonder: how can we think and feel through language about the mystery of language so that we can begin to understand how to use language for the sake of God’s eternal Love-Word?

We also acknowledge the power of image, ikon, to shape and distort meaning. Images give value and point to deep beauty. But images can devalue and celebrate the destruction of the very notion of beauty in the celebration of human creativity as an end in itself. Images draw us and often define us. Images repel us and redefine us. We “put on” our “faces” to alter our image or create a new image or hide our real image – even from ourselves. We confess our confusion in the face of the power of image. We wonder: how can we think and feel through ikon (image) about the mystery of image (ikon) so that we can begin to understand how to use ikon (image) for the sake of God’s eternal Love-Ikon?

A Theme Statement: *All of us have experienced the dramatic way in which the use and meaning of language and ikon have changed in our culture over the last twenty years. These profound changes have altered the way we talk, the way we learn, the way we teach, and the way we offer witness. This conference will explore the fracture of our common life, consider the mystery of language and ikon in the context of historic and living faith, and imagine a creativity of truth that offers hope and reconciliation.*

We have designed this exploration to:

1. be marked by creativity because language and ikon are alive with dynamic power;
2. expand our imagination because the language and image we employ to sketch and stretch our cultural boundaries is fragmented and torn;
3. nudge us toward learning a new language and iconography shaped by Incarnate Love;
4. help us to re-enter and re-center our ordinary lives with an extra-ordinary awareness of the depth of meaning in which we swim in our shared longing for wholeness.

If we, who gather together, are touched by the gracious Spirit of God, then we will say, with feeble language and fragmented images, that we have been enveloped into a deeper life of prayer and a community shaped by dialogue with and within The Word – Ikon. This will, in turn, empower us to love

those who hate us, sacrifice for those who seek to coerce us, and to be faithful witnesses to those around us in places where truth is under siege.

A Philosophical Meditation: In our current cultural moment, language/ikon and meaning have become untethered from the ordinary experience of reality outside of our individual consciousness. The prevailing assertion of the present appears to be rooted in the following set of assumptions:

1. Each individual is absolutely free to define their own life and their own destiny with all meaning understood in “self-referential” terms;
2. This assertion of our selves is free from all restraint caused by or imposed upon the autonomous self from history, culture, perceived or presumed sources of power, or any institutional structure;
3. In this setting, all value words are reduced to expressions of emotion severed from any claim to express reality or truth beyond “my truth” and “my reality.” As such, value words are merely expressions of power and are inherently coercive and oppressive. Thus, language and ikon are ultimately useful only to the extent they convey my individual assertion of myself as free from any coercive and oppressive power that would rob me of my freedom to define myself to myself and to the “Other.”

The net effect of these assertions is the notion that the meaning of all language and ikon is “private” and accessible to others only to the extent that they share my experience and are thus members of my “tribe.” Individually, a person can become a member of a tribe only by affirming, without reservation, the particular understanding of life shared by that tribe, or by fully identifying with that tribe by submitting their individual will to the Will of the tribe. If this assessment is true (in that, if it faithfully reflects our experience in our culture) then:

1. language *as* language has lost its meaning, and the assertions of meaning within our “talk” to “Others” is largely meaningless unless accompanied by tribal identification or the threat of force;
2. Ikon *as* ikon has lost its meaning, and the assertions of meaning within our “imaging” to “Others” is largely meaningless unless accompanied by tribal identification or the threat of force;
3. Dialogue in the pursuit of truth outside and beyond my experience or my free identification with my chosen tribe becomes impossible;

4. There is no truth beyond my tribe;
5. There can be no truth which could call into question my allegiance to my tribe;
6. *My* tribal language and iconography can be the *only* meaningful expression; all other tribal expressions are, by definition, oppressive and incoherent.

If the above is an accurate portrayal of our situation, then reason, marked by the use of a shared language which allows for the search for truth beyond myself, is inaccessible as a resource for conflict management or common life. Emotional identification with “Others” beyond my tribe is impossible because there are no shared human emotions. Willful activity in the free pursuit of a common human community in which love and forgiveness serve as the shared bonds that link us together is impossible because all efforts to communicate with other tribes for a larger purpose are deemed coercive and oppressive. The possibility of human community shaped by transcendent and sacrificial love is denied. The transcendent contradicts my autonomous self. The assertion of an ultimate reality beyond my immediate tribal experience threatens my very selfhood.

The C. S. Lewis Study Center asserts that despite these cultural changes, the human being is still engaged in a profound search for dialogue, meaning and purpose. The wisdom of human experience points unmistakably to the human capacity for relationship as the necessary context for the experience and acquisition of meaning that transcends our immediate circumstances. A meaningful life, in the wisdom literature of human experience, embodies loving relationships that grow and mature over time. These relationships involve the nurture of emotional life, intellectual curiosity, and creative activity for the purpose of shaping and building a more virtuous environment for the next generation.

In such a vision, language and image must reflect each arena or sphere of life with clarity, nuance, and metaphorical depth to capture, however imperfectly, the mysterious transcendent Reality in Whom we find ultimate meaning. Within the experience of those through history who point to Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of the transcendent “personal” mystery called God, the meaningful life is found in relationship with this gracious and loving God. This is the Triune God who has demonstrated His power to heal our self-inflicted wounds, defeat the powers of destruction and death, and graciously love us into an eternal relationship that is the means of reconciliation for all levels of our experience.

Language is understood as the gift of a gracious God. Language reflects the reality of relationships that can be healed and restored and reconciled, thus breaking the tribal separations built by our brokenness. Within the new relationship shaped by grace, language, in all its complexity and modalities,

expresses and gives witness to the deep meaning of existence and the hope of a transformative relational community.

Ikon is also understood as the gift of a gracious God. Ikon (image) reflects the reality of relationships that can be healed and restored and reconciled, thus breaking the tribal separations built by our brokenness. Within the new relationships shaped by grace, ikon, in all its creativity and modalities, expresses and gives witness to the deep meaning of existence and the hope of a transformative relational community.

Philosophically, the language employed in this statement points to the mode of the axiological. The Axiological is the realm of value. Despite all efforts to the contrary, the linguistic and visual discourse within contemporary culture is profoundly shaped by value assumptions. Every tribal group assumes their language and iconography is “good” while the expressions of opposing tribes is “evil.” The very act of creativity demands the assertion of value. Irony demands a remnant of meaning upon which the ironic can act. Could it be that creativity in all its forms implicitly demands the exercise of virtue? If that is so, then our struggle with language and image is fundamentally a moral struggle. And the re-unification of expression and meaning through creativity requires the catalyst of virtue.

Given the theme developed above, this conference will attempt to explore the manner in which Christian community provides, by its very embodiment, hope for a fractured world. We will explore the nature of truth. We will wonder about the nature of the gift of language itself. We will ponder the power of ikon to shape our deepest thoughts. We will search for insight in the Biblically shaped thought of C. S. Lewis. We will examine the intimate relationship between imagination and meaning. And we will point toward the Incarnation of Jesus, the Word become flesh and the Ikon of the Invisible God, as the ultimate cipher of Reality.

In much the same way, we must explore the deepest assertion of the Christian tradition: that in Jesus the Christ the Logos and Ikon becomes flesh and blood for us. Can a Trinitarian understanding of language help us recover meaning and provide clues to a new pedagogy for an “a-literate world”? Are there every day and practical ways parents, teachers, care givers, and “ordinary saints” can embody loving hospitality such that our language and our very lives are reinvigorated? And, can we, by God’s grace, begin to imagine afresh the ancient faith fleshed out in community that is yearning to incarnate the “ancient” and ever “new” beauty in a people marked by resurrection and hope?