

Our Words Matter

In the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the importance of language in shaping our world and our relationships is often powerfully, if subtly, accentuated. The first verses of Genesis describe God's creation of the world in terms of God speaking. God repeatedly says, "Let there be . . . ," and it is so. God then names what has been created, and pronounces it good.

The third of the Ten Commandments proscribes the vain use of God's name, that is, making wrongful use of it not just in the uttering of oaths but in the ascribing to God of anything that is not properly attributable to God. The ninth commandment condemns the bearing of false witness against one another.

Christians identify Jesus as God's Word made flesh, that is, God's speech (which expresses God's creative will and purpose) incarnated in a human being. In Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus recalls traditional teaching against swearing falsely, then proceeds to teach against swearing or making of oaths in any form. A person's word should be simply "yes" or "no" – the unvarnished truth.

In all these and other ways, Jewish and Christian teaching underscores the importance of the creative role of language, and the need for truthfulness, in the ordering of human society and the world.

We live in an age when language is constantly abused, in order to distort perceptions of reality, in order to "spin" the interpretation of events, in order to generate fear and mistrust, in order to besmirch those who are perceived as opponents, in order to stir political outrage and garner political support, in order to sell products and make profits, in order to exploit virtually every human weakness to the advantage of those who have the power to manipulate public discourse.

Recent calls for civility in public discourse are certainly in order. We have seen how inflammatory speech contributes to public polarization and distrust. Many argue whether those who engage in strident rhetoric are implicated in individual acts of violence. It cannot be disputed, however, that language shapes our thoughts and perceptions, and ultimately our actions. Abusive language is destructive, not creative. It generates ill-will and poisons relationships.

It is difficult to learn how to speak respectfully, truthfully, and critically. But language must retain the capacity to be formative, evaluative, and meaningful, without becoming oppressive or disintegrating. This is the challenge before us. It is a high calling!

Copyright 2011 by Byron C. Bangert