



BIBLICAL LANGUAGE AND THE LANGUAGE OF PREACHING*

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Faeder ure, thu the eart in heofunum,
Si thin nama gehalgod; to-becume thin rice
(1000 AD)

Our fadir that art in heuenes,
halwid be thi name; thi raume or kingdom come to the
(Wycliffite, ca. 1390)

O oure father which arte in heven,
Hallowed be thy name. Let thy kingdome come.
(Tyndale, 1534)¹

INTRODUCTION

Language changes—not just the English language, but every language. Some languages change more rapidly than others. In general, the more contact with other languages, the more rapid the change; in our time, the more language is mediated by advertising agencies and the entertainment industry, the more rapid the change. In a decadent culture, media-conditioned to the lowest standard of verbal intelligence, a degeneration of meaning and diminishment of comprehension corresponds to our evident loss of cultural memory. In a Christian sub-culture such as ours, this puts the very foundations of our faith in peril, for if the Scriptures are not received with understanding a vacuum is created and that vacuum tends to get filled with rubbish.

I take this to be a crucial problem for most North American Christian churches in our time. It is all too easy to laugh over the grade three vocabulary and incoherent morality of some politicians, but harder to acknowledge that in the entertainment industry—and frankly, a lot of preaching falls into this category—that sort of bombast, full of sound and fury and signifying next to nothing, is becoming merely part of the white noise people tune in or out at a whim. Babble of his sort is not normative language change, for in any healthy social context the purpose of language is still to convey meaning. Babble, or psychobabble, is a willfully induced distortion of meaning, usually for some ulterior purpose. There are many manifestations of this in decadent cultures—but let me give two concrete examples that directly impinge on Christian ministry.

BABBLE

First, there is the ubiquitous dumbed-down language of advertising, social media and the public square. Prophetic voices have long before now asked the question, “Who does this infantile order of language most serve?” Two generations ago George Orwell warned that political chaos is connected with the decay of language. In his novel *1984* the political masters of the totalitarian state know that by reducing the vocabulary of their citizens and debasing their language they cramp their ability to think.² In our time, as columnist David Brooks has noted, public language has also become demoralized. Brooks points to the way virtue words have decreased dramatically, while terms of abuse such as “loser,” “disgusting,” “weak,” and “idiot” have taken their place. Brooks’ concern is simply that *thought* has suffered as a consequence.³ As one of his reviewers sums up his point, “you cannot contemplate what you cannot articulate.”⁴

How do we as Christian teachers begin to cope with the “inability to contemplate what you cannot articulate”? Not, I think, by substituting general feel-good therapies for thoughtful teaching of the Word of God itself. In far too many cases the default response to perceived inability in our congregations to

think their way through a Psalm or a hymn by Charles Wesley or Isaac Watts is to provide them with vacuous and repetitive “praise songs” made palatable by schmaltzy musical accompaniment.

Another path of compromise is paraphrase and ‘modernization’ of the language of Scripture itself. Rather than fighting the diminishment of language in our culture, some pastors prefer user-friendly paraphrases to the Bible itself, just because they use fewer difficult or unfamiliar words. These pastors see themselves as needing to target the comfort zone of the culture more than to be scrupulous about conveying as clearly as possible what Scripture says in the original Hebrew and Greek. Unfortunately, many a phrase in such loose versions of the Bible is neither a translation, properly speaking, nor even an adequate approximation of what the text says. For example, to render Hebrews 11:1 (“Faith is the substance of things hoped for,” as the KJV responsibly has it) as “Now faith is being sure we will get what we hope for” (New Life Version) or “faith is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living” (Message) may be well-intended, but these are at best impoverished deflections of the original meaning. They carry a materialist overture and an emphasis on present experience, rather than, as in the original Greek, an understanding that faith is ordered to *eternal* beatitude, precisely the point of the whole chapter. When a reader—or preacher—takes such language to be what “the Bible says,” wittingly or not, these impoverished versions actually undermine the original text.

This challenge is not new. In his fourth-century treatise *On the Holy Spirit* St. Basil the Great stresses that Christian “instruction begins with the proper use of speech,” and asks: “What theological term is so insignificant that it will not greatly upset the balance of the scales unless it is used correctly?”⁵ My point today is similar. In our time, as in his, the task of would-be-faithful Christian preachers is *not* to resign ourselves to the therapeutic moral deism of weak facsimiles for Scripture, but to choose a reliable translation and teach from it, difficult words or not, by explaining the meaning of doctrinally important terms as

we go along. That we do so with all diligence is imperative, for very often what is at stake is not merely reliable representation of God's Word, but, as Basil noted, the consequent understanding of his *Person*.

Undeniably, the God of the Bible is difficult: holy, as we are not, demanding that we become holy, even as He is holy. We are to become more in His image, not He in ours: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9V).

Likewise, though the language of Jesus is vernacular, it is far from easy. Jesus not only reiterates the law of God, he intensifies it. He is poetic, teaching in parable and enigma that often leave his disciples as well as his enemies baffled. What he does *not* do is give them a pabulum of clichés and nostrums. He adds *nous*, mind, to the Great Commandment. Humble fishermen and arrogant religious folk alike have to *stretch* to understand. They have to put their minds to it. You who preach are called to no easy task, for as the Apostle Paul says, we are to "follow God's example, therefore, as dearly beloved children" (Ephesians. 5:1).

In a responsible home, children learn to deepen their capacity for meaning by imitating the language of their parents and teachers, not the other way round. The language which they learn ought *not* to be merely of the world, light-weight, sexually impure, and therapeutically vacuous in ways that will anesthetize their minds. The language which our flocks and our children need to learn and keep learning is the pure and undefiled, God-breathed words of Holy Scripture, rich in transcendence and a far higher view of the meaning of persons accordingly, that they "may be complete, equipped for every good work." In our time they will need this learning to escape the great deceit, and for eternity they will depend on it for the salvation of their souls.

DECONSTRUCTION

What I have just now been describing is a first order language problem in our culture, universal in its power to corrupt. I want to suggest that it may, however, be dealt with successfully by a rigorous exposition of Scripture in a context which takes Scripture to be true Revelation, or, as T.S. Eliot said, "a reliable report of the Word of God."⁶ Most of us are aware that we have also a second order language problem, a kind of disease of language to which academics, including seminarians, are especially prone, and which, if they succumb to it, paralyzes their will as surely as it beclouds their intellect. I refer to those fashionable views we associate with the literary and linguistic school of "deconstruction" and its many progressive academic allies. Though not unrelated to the first, this order of language abuse involves the dialectical redefinition of key words in our received theological vocabulary. This second degree abuse depends on a much greater command of the lexicon, a choice for cleverness over clarity, and works best if its victims think they know more than in fact they do. More subtle, more academically serpentine, and thoroughly gnostic, this type of language abuse is ultimately more dangerous to the pastor or teacher than the person in the pew, but it can appeal to the sophomore in any of us, especially if we have made something of an idol out of cleverness.

Deconstruction, a type of subversive redefinition of words so as to make them seem unstable, even to turn them inside out, is a strategy well known to all in this audience. Such a tactic for achieving redefinition is not nearly so new as it seems. As a tactical maneuver it has a long history, as old as the serpent in Eden. In theological contexts, re-definers have always capitalized upon sloppy thinking and loose understanding of terms to turn biblical meaning and principles inside out, all the while claiming to uphold them, and in so doing they have in many times and places been able "to deceive the very elect" (Matthew 24:24 KJV). The gullibility of Eve is an archetype.

Some of you may remember that the fourth book of St. Augustine's *Confessions* is devoted to an acknowledgement of his willful self-deception and deception of others. For Augustine, words had been toys, instruments for entertainment, for strategy in debate, for obtaining advantage and wielding power. He admits:

I was led astray myself and led others astray in turn. We were alike deceivers and deceived in all our different aims and ambitions, both publically when we expounded our so-called liberal ideas, and in private through our service to what we called religion. In public we were cocksure, in private superstitious, and everywhere void and empty (*Confessions* 4.1).⁷

A millennium and a half later, Soren Kierkegaard found that such infections of language had turned European Christendom into a fraud. Speaking of the preaching in his day, he deplored what he described as a collective "feat of dialectics [which] leaves everything standing, but empties it of significance."⁸ People still employ words such as "God" and "holy," he notes, but in such a fashion as to make it clear that God is nothing more than a weak projection of one's best self, and "holy" is a certain order of piety that will suffice for social respectability. The words remain, but not their meaning. With this we too are familiar.

If rhetoric is essentially the art of persuasion, dialectic is typically an art of *dissuasion*. As it operates in our own time, dialectic works not so much by persuading openly as by subverting presuppositions and traditional understandings, in this way eroding meaning at its base. Such deconstruction, by whatever name it goes, has *always* been preparatory to replacing one authority with another. The great Russian novelist Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, who was not untutored in dialectical redefinition, said that he cherished each word in his language and studied them in his dictionary "as if they were precious stones, each so precious that [he] would not exchange one for another."⁹ After

his conversion in a Siberian prison, he spent his entire life trying to write truth, and he knew that to do that he needed to recover the true meaning of ordinary words. By comparison, too many of our contemporaries can seem glib, sloppy in their use of the most precious words of all. Might this be a danger in our pulpits? If so, faithfulness to Holy Scripture will require of us a more rigorous use of biblical language, and careful definition of key terms in our teaching and preaching. My old friend, the late J.I. Packer, in his *Eighteen Words: The Most Important Words you will Ever Know*, offers an excellent guide for pastors and teachers; I am glad to recommend it.¹⁰

RECOVERING TRUTHFUL LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATE BIBLICAL PREACHING

During my student days at Princeton the philosopher Walter Kaufman reflected on the trends and fashions in modern Christian thought and pronounced our own time an “age of Judas” (Introduction to Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 12). What he was saying was that the criticisms of nominal Christianity articulated by Kierkegaard more than a century earlier applied very much to America in the 1960s, and he was clearly implicating modern theologians in particular. He prefaced his critique with some rhetorical questions:

Who would stand up against Christ and be counted his opponent? Who openly rejects the claims of the New Testament? [Imagine: at Princeton in my lifetime one could still say that and not seem ludicrous.] Who lets his “yea be yea, Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil?” Certainly not the apologists who simply ignore what gives offense or, when this is not feasible, offer “interpretations” instead of saying Nay. To be sure, it is not literally with a kiss that Christ is betrayed in the present age: today one betrays with an interpretation.¹¹

Many a subversive interpretation begins with a surreptitious redefinition of a biblical term.

Orthodox Christians, including Baptists, have in the past comforted themselves with assurances that none of their number would betray in this way. Baptist interpretation has tended to remain reliable, we feel, because we have always held up the Word of God on its own terms. Yet even as we have presumed the trustworthiness of our text in the pew translation, we may have missed the fact that the attack against a high view of Scripture has metastasized. Antagonists for three generations, many from within the seminaries, have been insisting that the issue is not in any case historical truth, which they declare to be beyond recovery, but rather an appreciation of relative cultural perspective, of the sociology of knowledge which requires a "new" dialectical development of meaning "in *contemporary* terms." This can appear as a call for cultural translation, a demand that the energies of biblical scholarship be turned toward *adapting* the text to contemporary conditions they think irreconcilable with the biblical view of persons and conditions. This is indeed to betray with a kiss, turning our Lord over to the dictates of our social and political shibboleths. Not merely mistranslation, then, but actual re-writing of the Bible is now being called for in some quarters. Such re-writing requires even more explicit perfidy than betrayal by interpretation, and would-be faithful pastors will need to develop deliberate teaching strategies in the face of it.

PASTORAL STRATEGIES

In such a spiritual war, the Church needs more rigorous preaching, not less—a preaching that is scrupulous in its use of biblical language and openly corrective of the abuse of it in our culture. As our secular contemporaries become less and less literate, we must teach our congregations to become more and more literate.

One difference between a genuinely literate person and an ordinary victim of cheating words is that a literate person

understands the historically determined character of the language he or she speaks. Nowhere is the advantage of such knowledge more essential than when a great text is considered, be it the works of Shakespeare, the dialogues of Plato, or the Bible. In all such cases, as George Steiner puts it, we discover that

... every language act has a temporal determinant. No semantic form is timeless. When using a word we wake into resonance, as it were, its entire previous history. A text is embedded in specific historical time; it has what linguists call a diachronic structure. *To read fully* is to restore all that one can of the immediacies of value and intent in which speech actually occurs.¹²

To be interested in language as a medium for the discovery of truth is thus to approach each text, each occasion of listening or reading, in humility. Someone else is talking. Humility in this case involves trying to understand the other person before asserting our own ideas, however clever. In the case of the words of Scripture, the divine authors' intent is usually not all that difficult to discern in context, even where it may well, as our earliest expositors saw, have several registers of application. To get at any of these, however, we must ask about more than what a given word in a text we are expounding means to our contemporaries, for their usage may well be a debasement of the original word.

Let me give you a couple of simple examples. In an age such as ours, in which many people take the highest human good to be sexual freedom, "freedom," a rather important biblical word as it happens, may have acquired a meaning so corruptive of its biblical sense as to be positively dangerous if not re-rooted in its historical and biblical context. If I ask my undergraduates what freedom means to them, they invariably answer in terms of "choice," "autonomy," even "liberty to define myself in terms I choose." When I ask them if they think that semantic range would do justice to the intention of Thomas Jefferson, some pause, especially if they have studied the Declaration of

Independence or his Letters. I then ask them what they think freedom meant to Chaucer or Wyclif, and they all go blank. "What about the Knight in the *Canterbury Tales* who "loved trouthe, honour, freedom, and curtesye"?¹³ I have to tell them that in the fourteenth century "freedom" was glossed in bilingual dictionaries as "largesse," generosity to others. This meaning, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* will confirm, is in our time preserved only in the phrase, "a free spirit," that sort of bon vivant who may spontaneously offer to buy everyone lunch. But any such generosity—other-directed largesse or charity—is polar opposite to my students' reflex definition, in which the meaning of freedom is entirely self-directed. "So then," I say, do you think that when Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32), he meant that the truth would make you autonomous, a law unto yourself?" We typically then have a discussion in which they discover that they really haven't understood Jesus at all, for the phrase is only part of a sentence in Greek which begins in the previous verse: "If you abide in my word, then shall you be truly my disciples, and then you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8: 31-32, NKJV). Freedom depends, in the usage of the Lord, on a sequence of "if-then" conditionals; one must abide (μεινῆτε) in his word, live there. This is in fact the *sine qua non* condition of being a true rather than a false disciple, and only that kind of obedience and self-effacement makes it possible to have the foggiest idea of what Jesus means by freedom.

Truth is another word needing clarification. In no small part this is because the prevalent theory of truth in our time does not require correspondence between word and deed or claim and fact, something which characterizes the correspondence theory of truth, historically fundamental to science and medicine, and certainly normative both epistemologically and morally in the Bible. For those of you who remember Aristotle, whose law of non-contradiction says that something cannot be itself and a contrary at the same time, you will see that this correspondence view of truth has been common to the logic of more than biblical tradition. Those who have read the general prologue to *The*

Canterbury Tales will remember that truth is also one of the things Chaucer's knight loved. But in Chaucer's era, "truth" carried an additional meaning which owed specifically to Scripture, namely the virtue of fidelity or trustworthiness. That sense is still visible in the *Book of Common Prayer* liturgy for marriage, in which the bride and groom conclude their vows to each other: "and thereto I pledge to thee my troth," which is to say more than "I am speaking these promises to you truthfully," but "I am pledging myself to be faithful to you forever."¹⁴

In our time another theory of truth has come to be prevalent. In the pragmatic theory of truth, truth is whatever you and perhaps some of your peers choose it to be; in the words of a prominent literary theorist (Jonathan Culler), "our truth is what gets us what we want."¹⁵ Needless perhaps to say it, but this theory has also been around a long time. When Pilate scoffed at Jesus, saying "What is truth?" he knew very well that "truth" in his world was anything that Caesar wanted it to be. For Jesus, by contrast, truth was a matter of fact, not opinion, and when he said of himself, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6), he clearly meant to be understood as saying that he was the embodiment of truth, the embodiment of faithfulness, and that he was trustworthy as no one in the world before him had ever been. In a self-referential world such as ours, the meaning of the word "truth" may be unstable in the minds of many, but the quality of truth as it is represented in the Word of God and the person of Jesus is not a matter of subjective opinion, like "my truth" or "our preferred narrative." The truth in God remains solid like a rock, yesterday, today, the same forever. To teach that effectively now, we need to re-root the word itself historically and in Scripture especially, with precision and clarity.

As Christians, we have a crucial task before us, not just as a necessity for self-preservation but as a moral obligation to others. We must endeavor to restore to the language of fellow-believers the richness and depth of its historical and biblical meaning. We must show them the power of language to distinguish, to contrast, not just compare, to detail the nature of

created reality in Scripture and in the moral life of faithful believers.

This can be done in a few sentences in almost any sermon. For those of you whose charge is a Church of the Blessed Power-Point Projector, it is certainly possible to do it simply by putting a few words, definitions, and examples on a slide. Try *that* instead of a video clip from a TV show or movie, and measure the results after a year or so. We should be more resistant to what Richard Lischer calls "the Gospel of Technology."¹⁶ Actually teaching people to think, to use the language of Scripture intelligently, will not only enable them to grasp more fully the truth and recognize distortion, it will give them more self-respect, more confidence in that faith which they profess.

Let us face the obvious. You do not get faith in language much beyond the point where you have lost the language of faith. By allowing words whose primary meaning is anchored in Scripture to be de-natured by worldly abuse, we have gotten into a swamp from which there can be no exit without first retracing our steps. We live in a world of babble, what Richard Rorty once called "incommensurable discourse,"¹⁷ a linguistic anarchy which has proven, however, insufficiently therapeutic to ward off social calamity. To restore sanity we will need to recognize, as Emmanuel Levinas puts it, that in the end there can be no intelligibility without transcendence. A corollary of this axiom is that there can be no sustained morality without ontology, just as there can be no Christian understanding without a diligent and faithful preaching of the Word of God, straight up, no fizz and no ice.

You are all intelligent men and women. You can all afford a good historical dictionary. What you cannot afford is to let ideological redefinition by antagonists to the Word of the Lord set the default understanding of those for whom you have spiritual responsibility. You are all familiar with the closing words of the Revelation to John. This is not an unprecedented warning in Holy Scripture. Here is another:

Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him. Add thou not to his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar. (Prov. 30:5-6; KJV)

And subtract not either. For the love of Christ and his Kingdom, please be at pains to define carefully, and patiently explain, every word of God to your people—in its original biblical register.

Our Father, may your name be kept as holy by us, and may your kingdom come and flourish in us. Please give us this day bread not only for our bodies, but the bread of life which is your Word and yourself. Forgive us, please, our sins—which are many, sins of omission as well as commission—even as we make a sincere effort to forgive everyone who has sinned against us. And deliver us from the evil of presuming to think we have a better idea than that which you have given to us in your Word and in Christ Jesus. Protect us from such evil when it is imposed upon us by others. For the Kingdom is yours, not ours, and the power and the glory of it are yours alone, now and forever. Amen.

NOTES

*I first essayed some of the ideas expressed here in talks given to a conference of Anglicans in Canada in 2016. Two of these talks were subsequently published in a magazine of the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth.

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