

By Our WORDS

A critical look at the power of our speech | C. JOHN WEBORG

During the 1920s, the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy raged in many denominations. In the Presbyterian Church, two major protagonists were Harry Emerson Fosdick and Clarence Edward Macartney. Fosdick, a prominent Protestant liberal pastor, preached a sermon with the title “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” Macartney, a Presbyterian pastor and author, felt compelled to challenge Fosdick publicly. Before Macartney went public with his challenge to Fosdick, however, he confirmed his use of Fosdick’s material for accuracy of representation with Fosdick himself.

That is a form of *civil* speech. Such speech trafficks in truthfulness of representation. At the same time it requires a *conduct* that matches the *content* of the speech.

By contrast, we recently witnessed in the news what can happen when accuracy of representation is missing.

Shirley Sherrod was an official of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, working in Georgia. She gave a speech last spring at a local NAACP

banquet, from which a blogger excerpted a small portion that seemed to reveal racism Sherrod had demonstrated against a white farmer. The excerpt made headlines all the way to Washington—to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the White House. Sherrod was fired. *Then* someone listened to her entire speech. It turns out she had helped the farmer save his farm, and was calling for moving beyond racism. Officials backtracked, apologized, and offered her a new job.

The attacks on Sherrod and the resultant firing were forms of *uncivil* speech. No one paid attention to the details or took the time to ask, “Did you listen to the entire speech?” A person was held up to public shame, slander, and loss. Her superiors appeared to be careless of truth, persons, and reputation.

Few have been as graphic as Saint Francis de Sales, the sixteenth-century saint, in describing the incendiary character of the tongue: “Rash judgment engenders anxiety, contempt of our neighbor, pride, self-complacency, and a hundred other most pernicious

effects. Among these, slander, the true bane of society, holds first place.” He goes on to say slander not only robs a neighbor of a good name, it requires reparations on the part of the slanderer so that one cannot “enter heaven with another’s goods.” A good name is the best of all goods. To be robbed of it is a great loss.

Slander, says Saint Francis, is a form of murder. We have three lives—the spiritual, constituted by God’s grace; the corporal, constituted by the soul; and the civil, which is constituted by one’s good name. Sin kills the first life, death the second, and slander the third.

Those who slander, Saint Francis asserts, commit three murders—they murder their own soul, the soul of the person they slandered, and the civil life of the person they slandered. (Remember, “civil” to St. Francis means one’s good name.) In *Introduction to the Devout Life*, he makes a comparison to Aristotle’s use of the serpent’s forked tongue: the slanderer’s forked tongue poisons the ear of the hearer and the reputation of the one slandered.



Words have the power to kill or to make alive; to create or to destroy; to consecrate or to desecrate.

The Bible has its own graphic words for the tongue. It is a “sharp sword” (Psalm 57:4); “a deadly arrow” (Jeremiah 9:8); “like snake venom under lips” (Psalm 140:3); and like a “fire” (James 3, the entire chapter is devoted to the problematic tongue).

On the other hand, it can be like “choice silver” (Proverbs 10:20), and “the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Proverbs 12:18). Isaiah said that he had been given a tongue that had been taught so that he could sustain with words those who are weary (Isaiah 50:4a).

Speech is given a positive, even formative role. Consider the follow-

ing texts:

“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6).

“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 5:6).

“Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity and sound speech that cannot be censored; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us” (Titus 2:8).

Finally, among the most solemn words Jesus ever spoke are those that

have to do with words on the day of judgment. “I tell you...you will have to give an account for every careless [idle, empty, in some translations] word you utter, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37).

It should not be surprising that so much weight is put on the use of words. By a word spoken the creation came to be. By a word the waters divided and Israel passed safely through to freedom. By a word spoken into the silence of Mary’s womb, said St. Ignatius of Antioch, the Word

C. John Weborg is professor emeritus of theology at North Park Theological Seminary.

became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. By a word this Jesus declared lepers healed, sins forgiven, and the dead raised.

Conversely, by a word Peter denied knowing Jesus. By a word Judas betrayed him. By a word Pilate condemned him to death. By words the crowd voted for the release of Barabbas and the death of Jesus. By words Saul of Tarsus was on his way to Damascus to authorize the deaths of the people of the Way. By words his life was abruptly halted, reversed, and he became one of those same people.

Words have the power to kill or to make alive; to create or to destroy; to consecrate or to desecrate. So as to how words used are dependent, not on the tongue but on *whose* tongue.

I once heard the late professor and theologian Paul Holmer say, “Words do not mean, people mean by words.” Now couple that with an entry considerably down the list of definitions of the word “civil” in the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary*. After stating the obvious uses of good order, decorum, duty, citizenship, and the like, it refers to *senses* that are connected with civilization and culture. Senses. Not ideas. Nothing of a legal nature. Senses that are connected with civilization and culture. I presume the entry means a citizenry both formed and informed by the historical narratives germane to the culture, the poetry, music, the folklore, and the religious tradition. Senses—the civil person means something by words but speaks *more than* and *for more* than the self. But just how much connectedness does one sense when one speaks? And to what is one connected? Civil people sense

something beyond self-interest.

In *Stories of English*, linguist David Crystal says that “language is the cheapest way of expressing identity,” and that our language choices are conditioned by more than subject matter, emotionally laden as such might be. Age, gender, number of hearers, and the setting also have to be factored in.

Civil speech attends to one’s listeners, but it calls for a sense of something greater than the immediacy of audience or personal applause.

If language is the cheapest way of expressing identity, identity includes the relationship one has to the listening audience, which is often a cheering section that does not offer any critical reflection, but only confirms whatever is said. Speech is often tailored to the audience, and sometimes the connection to the audience influences the speech. Speakers sense this connection and unless their critical powers are working, they can fall victim to an oft-cited economic cliché: what will the market bear? That cliché becomes “what will the audience bear”?

Whether the topic is politics, religion, ethnicity, economics, or even personal matters, don’t ask what the audience can bear as if one can get away with trivializing an issue, slurring a person’s ethnic origin, making politics a smear campaign more than a search for the common good. Civil speech attends to one’s listeners, but it calls for a sense of something greater than the immediacy of audience or personal applause.

There is a second form of sensing—of connections. This is not to the audience to whom one speaks but

the connections that give shape to loyalties, speech patterns, perceptions, and first reactions to issues. This connection might be to political parties, labor unions, service clubs, families of origin, and the like.

Recall that one meaning of being civil is one’s senses that connect one to one’s history. Each of the above—unions, political parties, clubs, and families—has a sense of connection or disconnection with others that affects speech and what one means by words. If a congregation has congregants of both labor and management and they work at the same place during a bitter labor dispute, how do they *sense* the connection or disconnection? That will determine 1) if they will speak to one another at Sunday worship, and 2) what manner of speech will take place. A congregation comprised of active, political leaders, equally partisan in their respective parties, can engage in the same tense interpersonal encounters.

Remembering Crystal’s assertion that language is the cheapest form of identity, there is one more overarching sense that embraces all partisans and gives us a transcending identity and an alternative form of speech. We are brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. That *sense* civilizes—Christianizes—our speech. It connects us with the word and sacraments, both of which bring our life and speech to judgment and justification before God through Christ. We can sustain with words those who are weary, and our words will not exploit others no matter how offended or tempted we might be, just as Jesus Christ exploited no one. Then we will speak with a guarded mouth and a guided tongue. ■