

LANGUAGE: POVERTY & PLENTY

Presented by Mr. Frank Bridwell

I would like to begin with two fundamental observations about language that I think are key to its use and its flourishing. First, the English language is a rich storehouse of beauty with an unparalleled range of expression among the languages of the western world. This is not an Anglo-American prejudice but a demonstrable fact. There are 400,000 words in the English language [the O.E.D. contains 600,000 but many of those are no longer in use]. By contrast, the German language has 120,000 words and French 105,000. Of course no individual possesses a vocabulary that large [One scholar says that Shakespeare had a vocabulary of 30,000 words but no modern has more than half that number.].

So, for us, the available linguistic material for our use is rich indeed. But what do we do with it? Sad to say, not very much. In both public and private usage the English language has been bastardized and corrupted, especially among the young. George Mcknight says that among English and American young people Half of their everyday speech consists of thirty-four words. What a waste of potential!

The second fundamental observation that I would like to make is that language is the Carrier of Civilization and the health of a civilization stands in direct proportion to the vitality of its language. When I say that language, written and spoken, is the carrier of civilization I mean two things. First, the history of the rise of civilization everywhere demonstrates clearly that only when people are able to establish among themselves clear communication of their thoughts and common aims do they rise above barbarism to the level of civilized life. Secondly, once a civilization has been created it can be maintained only when its great achievements can be transmitted to succeeding generations who themselves must not only maintain but add to that heritage. And language, written and spoken, is the means both of the transmissive and the contributory character of civilization.

So we must ask ourselves how and why our language has become so impoverished and what, if anything, we can do about it. Eugene RosenstockHusey, in his book *Speech And Reality*, poses that question this way: “Why is there so much abuse of language? Only important things are imitated and abused, and perverted.

Corrupti optima pessima - It is a Latin dictum. It means: the corruption of the best is worse than any other” Or George Steiner, in his book *Language And Silence*, has said: “Unless we restore to the words in our newspapers, laws and political acts some measure of clarity and stringency of meaning, our lives draw nearer to chaos. There will then come to pass a new Dark Ages. The prospect is not remote.” I find myself correcting the grammar of television anchors. My wife says, “they can't hear you.” But I can't sit still while they mangle the English language.

Well, this matter of the poverty of our language and its abuse and corruption cannot be plumbed in a twenty-minute lecture. That would require a book. So today, I want to focus our attention on some examples of its better usage, which I hope will serve to inspire us to improve our own speaking and writing. In doing this, I would like to pose one essential question. ***What is the purpose of language? That is, what is its proper function?***

I maintain that there are three fundamental dimensions of language. The first and primary dimension of language is basic communication - and clarity and simplicity are the keys to its health. Clarity is created by good grammar and syntax, of course, but also by the presence of common verbiage. When the fundamental rules of good grammar are violated, and we lose our common vocabulary to the argot of specialized fields of inquiry, our communication becomes cloudy and indistinct, lapsing into barbarity.

J. Robert Oppenheimer has pointed out that “the breakdown of communication is as grave within the sciences as it is between the sciences and the humanities.

Everywhere knowledge is splintering into intense specialization, guarded by technical languages fewer and fewer of which can be mastered by any individual mind.” Technical specialization breaks down our common vocabulary so necessary as a social bond and isolates speech into discrete fields of nomenclature as a substitute for common speech.

Technology is eroding our common language. There is, of course, an online language of abbreviated speech that vulgarizes our rich and expressive vocabulary. But even a hundred and fifty years ago, we may have seen the entering wedge of technological effect. With the invention of the telephone, one man said to another with enthusiasm, "Now Maine can talk to Georgia?. To which his companion replied, "Yes, but does Maine have anything to say to Georgia?"

But there is a second dimension of language which is too often missing in both our speaking and our writing. It is what I would call "color" or "expressiveness." Here simplicity matters. A few words rich in meaning are much superior to many bland or vague words which touch neither the mind nor the heart. Let me give you some historical examples of simplicity and expressiveness in language. The valiant stand of the Spartans [also called Lacadaemonions] against the Persian host at Thermopolae in the second Persian war. There stands a stela inscribed with these simple but poignant words: "Go stranger and tell the Lacadaemonions that we died here according to their laws".

Or Edward Gibbon's opening sentence in his magisterial *Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire*. He might have said that the Roman Empire had the best lands and most civilized people in the world. But here is how he expressed that idea.

"In the second century of the Christian era, the Empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth and the most civilized portion of mankind."

Or Edmund Burke's speech on the floor of the House of Commons at the time of the American colonies' protests lodged against Parliamentary taxation policies: He spoke of the American protests in these words: "They augur misgovernment at a distance and snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze.

Then too in more recent times there is Lincoln's first inaugural address uttered at a time when the Union was breaking up: He spoke as follows: "I am loath to close. We are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when touched again, as surely they will be by the better angels of our nature."

Or Tennyson's poignant lament in his poem Locksley Hall. He might have said: "This is the age of materialism." But this is what he did say:

*What is it that I should turn to,
Lighting upon days like these.
Every door is barred with gold
And opens but to golden keys*

These are examples of EXPRESSIVE SPEECH. And they touch us with their emotive power. They are what Rosenstock Husey calls "the ennobling quality of articulate speech." There is nothing mysterious about the ability to speak so or write. Winston Churchill is a perfect example. He talks about how the most outstanding students went on to study Latin and Greek while he lagged behind. He writes: "By being so long in the lowest form [at Harrow], I gained an immense advantage over the cleverer boys...I got into my bones the essential structure of the ordinary British sentence which is a noble thing."

The third dimension, and arguably the most important dimension of language, is its creative power. The central fact to bear in mind is that language was the means by which God created the universe and as archbishop Tench has said, is, "the divine capacity of language with which man was created." God spoke the universe into existence. Karl Barth says, "The word of God is not simply a cognitive message but a divine event." Note the creative power of language in these biblical passages. Hear Eliphaz speak in the book of Job: "A word stole upon me,....a spirit glided over my face, the hair of my flesh stood up." 4.12-17. Or Isaiah speaking: "The Lord has sent a word against Jacob and it has lit upon Israel." 9.7

Here language is not just a means of communication but a vital and creative power. Gerhard Von Rad concludes an arresting passage in these words.

"We may notice in passing that....in out of the ordinary situations because of the mysterious power of creation, language could produce either something new, or an intensified form of something already in existence: that is to say language itself became creative and this is a possibility which language has never lost even to this day."

“And Dorothy Sayers argues this very point in her book *The Mind Of The Maker* asserting that the rich character of human speech is due to the fact that man is made in the image of God. We find in the book of Genesis these words: “So God created man in His own image; In the image of God He created him,” To Sayers, being in the image of God means that like God man may create. Speaking of the Genesis writer she says: “Looking at man, he sees in him something essentially divine, but when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the “image” of God was modeled, we find only the single assertion, “God created”. The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things.”

What man has not heard his wife say to him: “I love you” and not found created in him a depth of feeling that rises above the cares of everyday experience. Let me give you two historical examples of speech as a creative power. Or William Jennings Bryan’s “Cross of Gold speech at the Democratic party’s national convention in 1896. The great issue of that day was whether our national currency should be based only upon gold reserves, which limited the amount of money in circulation, or upon both gold and silver, which would expand the money supply to the advantage of farmers and debtors. Bryan, a moderately successful Nebraska attorney but in no way a famous one, rose to speak to that convention concluding with these electrifying words. “Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses, we shall answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them, You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.” The audience, after a stunned silence, rose to shouts of pandemonium and nominated Bryan as their candidate for the presidency of the United States.

Or Winston Churchill’s famous address to the British Parliament in the dark early days of the second world war in 1940 when the Nazi invasion of Britain seemed imminent: “We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills: we shall never surrender.” That speech galvanized the British heart and mind and created a resolve that eventually saw victory and peace.

So I conclude my remarks with an urgent appeal to all of us to reflect upon the grave status of our language - this thing that God has given us.

Let us treasure it, guard it carefully against its abuse, do nothing to further its demise, and honor those who have demonstrated its richness and who serve as models of this most vital part of our lives. Thank you.