

THE WELL WROUGHT WORD

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Words are important. Jesus Christ is identified as the Word, and it is through his Word and by his Word that the world was created and is sustained. Through the prophets and Apostles, God has given us the Written Word. Along with the Sacrament, right words properly orient our worship. These, together, create burning hearts, open blinded eyes and empower people to share the very good news of Jesus Christ. With our words we reshape our church and our culture for good or evil, help or harm, life or death (Proverbs 18:21).

All words are working words, and well-wrought words have a directed divine intention that moves us toward right thinking and right living. But how do we know when and what to speak? How do we know how to speak? There are many good answers to these questions, and notable Christians throughout history have provided us with a number of guidelines and guardrails. Saint Charbel, a Maronite Christian from the late 19th century, has provided us with at least one. Charbel suggests that if our words are not more edifying than our silence, we should likely remain silent. This is an excellent caution by which to govern our conversation.

As might be expected, the Bible also has a great deal to say about the use of the tongue, about how we use our words. One biblical text, from 1 Peter 4: 11, provides us with at least three broad directives for speaking well-wrought words. Here we read, “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4: 11, KJV), and here we find our threefold directives about the question of speech, the importance of speech and the content of speech.

When 1 Peter 4: 11 uses the word “if,” it calls us to question the necessity of speaking. The word “if,” as well as an analysis of Christian history itself, tells us that there is always a *question of speech*. Speech is not a “given” or a “must.” Silence often outweighs speech. Caution often outweighs conversation. How often have we spoken words that we regret? How often have we spoken words that do not edify, sanctify or glorify? How often have we torn down and not built up? Even God Himself chose the right time to speak all of being into existence. Obviously, therefore, any time and any speech are not acceptable. There are right and wrong times, right and wrong words. When considering conversation, the how and when and why of speaking, we must ask ourselves whether God is best served by our speech or by our silence. Just because a word can be given, does not mean that a word must be given. Many things can be said, but that does not mean that many things should be said.

As well, our text from 1 Peter 4 emphasizes the *importance of speech*. This is nothing new, although we often forget it. God speaks. God has gifted us with speech. We, therefore, must speak. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called and commissioned to speak good news that edifies others and glorifies God. Speaking is important. The words “let him” in our text implies – among other things – that there is a permissibility and a purpose of speaking. The *permissibility of speaking* suggests that, as all true speech is rooted and grounded in God, our conversation must be Christ-like and Christ-centered. Christian speech is always, in some way, borrowed speech. Are our words, words that we have so-to-speak borrowed from the vocabulary of God, in keeping with His identity and His intention? Conversation is a commission, but it is a cautious commission that must be dominated by caritas (heart, love). Similarly, the *purpose of speaking* suggests that all true speech is inspirationally intentional. There is, consequently, no such thing as “casual conversation.” And, while this statement might be a bit of an exaggeration (as every facet of speech bears a conscious or unconscious intention), we would be wise to think about how very careful God was and is with His words.

Finally, there is *the content of speaking*. 1 Peter 4: 11 tells us that our words must be spoken as if they were the “oracles of God.” This is a very high and holy calling, indeed! We of course understand and appreciate that our words, even the best of our words, will never aspire to the unique graces that God has endowed the writers of our Holy Bible. They had a unique call. They had a unique commission. Their words bore, and continue to bear, a unique charism. Nevertheless, if we embrace what St. Peter tells us, our words must be chosen as if they were God’s very words, His very oracles. The oracles of God, Bible-words so-to-speak, are the content of what we say. God’s speech must dominate and direct our speech.

God has given us words, language. Words are important, essential, a matter of life or death. Are we crafting well-wrought words? Good speech is God speech, God inspired, guided and guarded.

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