

Words of Counsel – Part 2: Letting Words Work



by PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

Do you know why I love words? They work into me. They make me marvel. They make me worship. They make me weep. They draw me out of callousness. A writer can leave words on a page, and hundreds of years later they still work on us. Take, for instance, the Puritan prayers of contrition in *The Valley of Vision*:

My heart is without affection, and full of leaks.
 My memory has no retention,
 So I forget easily the lessons learned,
 And thy truths seep away.
 Give me a broken heart that yet carries home
 The water of grace.¹

What an honest prayer! We let the life-giving power of God's grace stream out of our leaking hearts; we let God's truths trickle away with our shoddy memory.

The Puritans certainly knew how to turn a pious phrase, but that wasn't their aim. They wanted their words to work so as to help others come into God's presence, rediscover the riches of the gospel, and be shaped into the image of Christ. I can think of no better use of words for how counselors in God's kingdom should use words.

In part one of this article, I examined Genesis 1–3 and laid a biblical foundation for five uses of words: communing, naming, evaluating, promising, and directing. Our task now is to see how we can let written words work in our counsel with others according to these five uses. I may not be a counselor, but I am a writer, and I'm confident that what

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¹ Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), 128.

follows will help your words work into your readers, drawing them closer to the God who speaks.

Writing Is a Conversation

Before we examine how we can write effectively according to the five uses of words we uncovered in Genesis 1–3, we need to understand that writing is conversation. Blogs, letters, articles, books, emails, texts—they’re all conversations. And in all of these, counselors have the opportunity to make the command in Ephesians 4:29—only speak words that will build others up—true and effective. Indeed, we speak to bless and encourage others, and we have the same goal in mind when we write. The difference is that, in writing, we are separated from our conversation partner, so we must do all that we can to ensure that our words find their way to the head and to the heart. To find their way to the head, our words must be concise and precise. To find their way to the heart, they must be personal. We should take a few moments to explore what this means exactly.

Be Concise. Our conversations will be most effective when we tighten up our sentences and cut out unnecessary words. Doing so helps to clarify our intended meaning. For example, we could write, “Whatever we think is most valuable is what we begin to look like, either for our spiritual destruction or for our spiritual redemption.” But would those words be as effective as these: “What you revere you resemble, either for ruin or restoration”?²

Now, this doesn’t mean that we cut out all of the details and be terse at all costs. The trick is knowing the difference between relevant details and irrelevant ones. Relevant details point to larger themes. Consider the words Isaiah used to describe the wicked generation of Judah:

The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.
From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores and raw wounds;
they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil. (Isa 1:5–6)

Each clause is short and direct, and yet we still find captivating details pointing to a larger theme. Notice how Judah’s sin-sickness is described: the *whole* head is sick, not just part of it. The *whole* heart is not just sick, but also *faint*. Rather than *soundness* in their spiritual bodies, there are *bruises*, *sores*, and *raw wounds*. These are *not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil*. The people of Judah have become spiritually mauled by their own faithlessness; the details of their wounds point to the treacherous consequences of infidelity.

While useful details draw the reader into conversation and empower our message, useless ones weaken it. They make the reader question whether or not we know what we want to say—or, at the very least, they question whether or not we know *how* to say it.

² G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 368–69.

Prolix prose can signal to the reader that we are either insincere or uncertain. As George Orwell puts it, “The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns, as it were, instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink.”³ Words should be treated as precious currency, and that means knowing our message well enough to make every word tell.⁴

Be Precise. Precision is one of the long-standing difficulties of conversation. It has troubled even the most prolific writers. C. S. Lewis, commenting on ambiguity, said that every writer needs . . .

. . . to know exactly what he wants to say, and . . . to be sure he is saying exactly that. The reader, we must remember, does not start by knowing what we mean. If our words are ambiguous, our meaning will escape him. I sometimes think that writing is like driving sheep down a road. If there is any gate open to the left or the right the readers will most certainly go into it.⁵

As we minister to people, we need to let the reader see a person on the page, not simply a parcel of information or a rote response.

Have something to say and say exactly that. Seems simple, doesn’t it? Perhaps it was for someone as talented as Lewis, but, for many of us, we easily lose sight of our intentions, become excited or careless, and say “exactly something else,” letting our readers, like sheep, wander off the road.

Ambiguity compromises effectiveness, and sometimes the cure for ambiguity is a well-placed adverb or adjective. Consider the difference it would have made if Paul had left out the words “in love” in Ephesians 4:15. It would read like this: “speaking truth, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” Instead, he wrote, “speaking truth *in love*.” Isn’t that clearer? When we can use an apt adverbial phrase to tell the reader *when, how, and in what way* an action is to be carried out, it clarifies our meaning.

Be Personal. Lastly, effective conversations are personal; they reveal who we are. As we minister to people, we need to let the reader see a person on the page, not simply a

³ George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in *George Orwell: Essays* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 2002), 964.

⁴ William Strunk Jr., and E. B. White, *Elements of Style*, 50th Anniversary ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009), 23.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, “Cross-Examination,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 263.

parcel of information or a rote response. In the following excerpt from a pastoral letter, John Calvin writes to a man after the death of the man's son. Note how Calvin doesn't just offer his condolences. He offers a personal response; he speaks about how he has been moved and affected by his friend's tragic loss.

When I first received the intelligence of the death of your son Louis, I was so utterly overpowered that for many days I was fit for nothing but to grieve; and albeit I was somehow upheld before the Lord by those aids wherewith he sustains our souls in affliction, among men, however, I was almost a nonentity.⁶

If you want to write effectively, be concise, be precise, and be personal.

Death can have an isolating effect. But Calvin assures his friend that he is not alone—in effect, “I also feel isolated from those around me. I feel like a ‘nonentity’—as if I do not even exist.” Calvin does not simply rehearse the truths of Scripture about life after death and how all things work out for the good of those who love the Lord. He lets his person show up on the page, which surely provided more comfort than a brief Scripture reference would have.

In short, if you want to write effectively, be concise, be precise, and be personal.

Returning to Genesis 1–3

Now that we've looked at *what* writing is (conversation), we can look at *how* it's used effectively. In Part 1 (*JBC* 27:2), we examined Genesis 1–3 and learned that words are endowed with power for good or evil. This power is manifested in the following ways:

1. Words foster *communion* (and they disrupt communion).
2. Words *name* what we see around us (and they “misname” what we see).
3. Words *evaluate*, judging good and evil (and they evaluate falsely).
4. Words *promise* (and they make false promises).
5. Words *direct*, telling us what to do and not to do (and they misdirect).

We also learned how Christ has redeemed our use of words in each of these areas. In what follows, we will unpack these five uses of words for writing in ministry and counseling, keeping in mind what we have learned about writing as conversation. In doing so, we will see that there is a way to “let words work” so that they bring our readers closer to the God who speaks.⁷

⁶ From Volume 1 of John Calvin's *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters* (1858; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 4:246.

⁷ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 48.

Communing

We'll spend more time on this section than the others because communing with those whom we counsel is vital if our aim is to point people to the God who loves to commune with his creatures.

Written words can bring the writer and the reader together. But what does this look like specifically? Let's start by looking at the way the apostle Paul communed with the Ephesians:

Through [Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are *fellow citizens with the saints* and *members of the household of God*, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a *holy temple in the Lord*. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph 2:18–22)

One of the ways in which Paul communes with his readers is by using metaphorical language that is linked to their life situation. Take, for example, the words *fellow citizens with the saints*. The Jews reading Paul's words were second class citizens in a brutal, pagan empire. His listeners longed for the day when they would be first class citizens in God's kingdom, and Paul was telling them that the day had come. But they were more than citizens; they were members of the King's *household*. Households in Jewish times were tightly knit communities, focal points of village life.⁸ What's more, to be a part of the King's household was to be so close to him as to dine at his table. But even more sacred than the King's house is the King's *temple*. The temple was the heart of Jewish life: the place where the nation's identity was maintained by its worship of the one true God. This sacred space would have been prized above all else by Paul's listeners, and he's telling them they are the very bricks bound together to form the walls of God's presence. Every image Paul used struck a chord in the heart of his listeners. He knew who he was talking to, and purposefully used language that would be meaningful to them.

In addition to using words that will be meaningful to our readers, we also need to consider the use of person and voice. The first person plural (*we*) and the second person (*you*) both help the reader feel included, and the active voice delivers information more efficiently than the passive voice. In the following passage, note the use of the first person plural and active verbs as Jack Miller writes a pastoral letter to a missionary struggling with the recent death of his mother.

It would be easy to say: it all works together for good. But it is not cheap and easy. The context of Romans 8:28 is one of suffering. For

⁸ Oded Borowski, *Daily Life in Biblical Times* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 16.

God uses our sufferings to chisel away at our pride, self-dependence, and self-boasting. His methods are sometimes fiery. He has a hot chisel, if you will. He must see in each of us a resistance to His will that is very intense and requires the strongest measures to change us into Christ likeness.⁹

The repeated use of *our* and *us* helps to draw us closer to the author. Because he includes himself and the reader as actors in several of the sentences, we feel that we are on the same side of the table. The active verbs (*works, uses, requires*) sustain the momentum of the author's message.

The above example also illustrates how effective it can be for the author to put himself in the same category as the reader. Each one of us was once lost in sin and continues to battle it by the hour. If readers see you make a distinction between yourself and them, they may take it as spiritual bigotry. What you have to offer is valuable and can spread life-altering grace in God's kingdom. But if you dangle what you've received in grace before the face of another sinner still caught in a particular foot trap, then you only add insult to injury. Let the person into the redeeming conversation by presenting an experience in language that reflects your ability to personally relate to the situation. In other words, don't hide your struggles—they leave the door open for communion. Take, for example, the following passage:

For me the month of October in 1987 was a time of heavy-duty anxiety. Happiness? There seemed to be no place for it. The onset of lymphoma really branded my mind so that my emotions were sensitized, even sometimes dominated, by the whole experience. On the one level, I was easily moved to fear by any fever, tightness of my belt through adding a little weight, or any feeling of unusual tiredness. You may know that these are all symptoms of lymphoma—and of a thousand other things. On a deeper level, there was the haunting question of God's dependability, my security in Him. My troubling question was, "If He let me have lymphoma, what is coming next?" And will He permit it to come back?¹⁰

Miller reveals the honest questions of his heart—letting the reader see that his faith was not as it "should" have been. In moments of suffering, we all are prone to wrestle with the truths and trustworthiness of God, and so we experience a sense of communion with Miller.

Lastly, remember that details enthrall people; they draw them into conversation and help them envision what you describe. Jesus did not feed the crowds with "food" or even

⁹ C. John Miller, *The Heart of a Servant Leader: Letters from Jack Miller*, ed. Barbara Miller Juliani (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 182.

¹⁰ C. John Miller, *The Heart of a Servant Leader*, 294.

with “some fish and some bread”; there were *five* loaves and *two* fish (Matt 14:17). In John’s gospel, Simon Peter hauled in not 152, not 154, but 153 fish (John 21:11). Every detail in a narrative is important, and writing for counseling takes seriously the narratives both in Scripture and in people’s lives. Use details to paint a picture, rather than propositions to convey information; *show* the reader what you mean rather than *tell* him, and remember that details make the heart of communion palpitate. If you want to commune with your reader, you’ll need to do more than speak in generalities.

Naming

We are a naming culture. In communing with our readers, we must be aware of the names we use for people. We like to categorize people based on their thoughts and behaviors. Someone who kills is a murderer. Someone who steals is a thief. Someone who donates to charity is a philanthropist. Paul even lists categories of people in this way in his letter to the Romans when he describes those who have rejected God: “they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God . . . inventors of evil” (Rom 1:29–30). Paul names people this way in order to admonish his readers, but not in the way we might expect. Rather than saying, “Don’t be like these people” (that is obvious), Paul says, “Don’t pass judgment on them,” for “in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things” (Rom 2:1). There are two lessons here for our naming culture: (1) the names we have for people can foster the illusion that we are essentially different from those around us—perhaps less in need of God’s grace; and (2) in naming others we can call down judgment on ourselves because we do the same things. How do these truths affect our writing?

When we write, we must guard against the defining quality that accompanies naming. This is especially true for counselors who can use any number of diagnostic labels for people. Consider the name “social anxiety disorder.” Someone with this diagnosis suffers from intense stress and paralyzing fear in certain social situations. The name codifies the problem, and may help the individual to begin to address it. But using the label also increases the risk that it becomes the person’s identity. Remember, we are Christians—men and women in Christ. *That* is the identity to which we are molded. It would be better to say that the person is a Christian who experiences anxiety in social situations. This both retains the person’s primary identity in Christ and also reduces the risk that others will be tempted to feel superior and judge someone who has a diagnostic label.

Evaluating

In giving counsel, we commune with others and give names to their thoughts and behaviors. We also examine those thoughts and behaviors through a biblical lens and make judgments about whether something is good or evil, keeping in mind that we are all sinners and that ultimately God is the only one fit to judge the works of others. When we see evil, we are to write as sinners writing to sinners, and are to restore one another *gently*, knowing

there is no room for pride (Gal 6:1). The words you choose should reflect this by being based only on God's words, and by including yourself among those in need of instruction. We need God to help us use and apply Scripture in a person's life in wise and winsome ways, all the while with an eye on our own shortcomings. Consider John Newton's words against pride, spoken to himself as much as to his reader:

He that abaseth himself is sure to be honored. And that this temper is so hard to attain and preserve, is a striking proof of our depravity—for are we not sinners? Were we not rebels and enemies before we knew the gospel; and have we not been unfaithful, backsliding, and unprofitable ever since? . . . Have we any thing which we have not received? Or have we received any thing which we have not abused? Why then is dust and ashes proud?¹¹

Dust and ashes—remnants of things once built up, now settled to the ground. We cannot help but stop to consider the pervasiveness of pride. Perceptive biblical evaluation is like that: it makes us stop. The gears of our life's clockwork click to a halt, and we start thinking about what makes the clock tick to begin with. Biblical evaluation encourages reflection and change.

Have you ever turned to evaluate your own actions after hearing of another's blunders? Another person's honesty can sometimes work as an antidote for our own stubbornness. Augustine's *Confessions* is a prime example, particularly when he describes a pointless sin of his youth.

Close to our vineyard there was a pear tree laden with fruit. . . . We nasty lads went there to shake down the fruit and carry it off at dead of night. . . . We took enormous quantities not to feast on ourselves but perhaps to throw to the pigs; we did eat a few, but that was not our motive: we derived pleasure from the deed simply because it was forbidden.¹²

Everyone has a "pear tree story," and once Augustine has told his, we need little prompting to consider the potential motivations underlying our own sinful actions. Hence, an honest revelation by a writer leads to the self-evaluation of his readers.

Promising

So, we commune with the reader, use names cautiously, humbly evaluate according to God's word—what next? Writers, keep your promises.

In essays and articles, our promises usually appear in the introductory paragraph(s); we make a statement or a claim about what we aim to accomplish. I did just that in this

¹¹ John Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, ed. Josiah Bull (1869; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 114.

¹² Augustine, *Confessions* 2.9.

article. Near the end of the introduction, I informed you that “our task now is to see how we can let written words work in our counsel with others according to these five uses.” I’m sure you took me at my word and rightly expected that I would explore all five uses of words. But imagine if I only covered the first four uses—communion, naming, evaluating, and promising—and neglected to explore the final, directing. How might you, judicious reader, think of me then? How might you evaluate this article? I would not blame you if you felt frustrated. You may have thought that I was careless; perhaps you would even feel uncared for because I failed to follow through with what I said I would do. Fellow writers, if you promise to do something in the introduction of a case study, article, etc. and then fail to carry it out, there are two noteworthy implications: (1) you will lose your credibility with the reader because he sees that you either do not know how to fulfill a promise or have chosen to avoid doing so; (2) whatever promise you *did* fulfill now seems like “second prize”—not bad, but not everything that the reader has been told to expect. In this sense, you have broken trust with the reader.

When you don’t accomplish what you set out to do, readers are disappointed, at best, or apathetic toward your content, at worst. Follow the example of the God of Scripture: keep your promises to your readers.

Directing

We either direct or misdirect others every time we write. Our words have *implications* for readers. In the counseling genre, this often comes in the form of what I call “soft imperatives.” We use imperatives to guide others in what to do or think or how to respond to a situation. For example, Matthew 6:25, “Therefore I tell you, *do not be anxious about your life*, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on.” As sinners, we often react defensively to imperatives. We may accept them in Scripture, but it’s difficult to receive imperatives warmly—that is, unless they are softened. To soften an imperative is to round off its sharp edges so that it’s easier for a reader to receive. Consider the difference between these two sentences (words in *italics* bring out the “softening”):

Stop trying to have forty minute daily devotionals and get realistic.

versus

You *might* need to *scale down* your expectations for times of individual study and prayer—*perhaps* having several ten-minute blocks of time *would be* more feasible than one longer time.¹³

Softening the imperative makes the reader more likely to consider the counsel.

We can also nudge the reader in the direction we’d like him or her to go when we present a string of rhetorical questions. Get your readers to say “yes” enough, and you will gain their confidence. Just look at Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:25–30:

¹³ Michael R. Emler, *Help for the Caregiver: Facing the Challenges with Understanding and Strength* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2008), 17.

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

Yes, life is more than food and clothing. Yes, I am more important to my Father than a bird. Yes, you're right: I cannot add an hour to my life by worrying. Yes, I suppose God will clothe me if he clothes even the grass so beautifully. With each positive response to a rhetorical question, we grow more confident in God's care for us.¹⁴

Let Words Work

Words turn over the embers of our souls. They work into us. And one of the many reasons why they work is that they have been set on a page by someone who longed to converse with readers and who took explicit measures to do so, knowing that the *manner* of expression is just as critical as its *matter*. As one experienced writer puts it, "When we take care to create a beautiful way of speaking or writing about something beautiful, the eloquence—the beauty of the form—reflects and honors the beauty of the subject and so honors the truth."¹⁵ This is all the more true for words of counsel—and we are always in need of timely counsel. But if counsel is not thoughtfully written—if it is terse, impersonal, or too direct—it will not effectually work into our readers.

Letting words work is a craft, an art—one that has been exercised perfectly throughout history by our speaking God. As his creatures, we honor him when we dwell on how our words will find their way to the heads and hearts of our readers—offering redemptive conversations in a world where words are considered as worthless as roadside grit. Don't be fooled. What the world considers grit the King considers gold. Spend words wisely.

¹⁴ There is one caution with the use of rhetorical questions: be careful you don't string together so many that the reader begins to wonder what you're getting at.

¹⁵ John Piper, "Is There Christian Eloquence?" in *The Power of Words and the Wonder of God*, John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 80.

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