

Notes

Political Discourse: The Power of Words

Christian Attitudes and Strategies

Jerry Truex; Oct 9, 2016

A. Introduction

Today we continue our series on the Church and State. We are addressing such questions as: (1) Should Christians or the church be involved with politics and the governance of the state? (2) If so, what are the obligations of Christians or the church toward politics and the government?

Today, we will briefly look at current *political discourse* we are witnessing the presidential debates. Then we will look at the power words have in the social and political construction of reality. Most importantly, we dwell on words of Scripture that shape Christian attitudes toward political discourse and criteria for assessing that discourse.

B. Video Clip of the Presidential Debates

When we think of who should be the president of the United States, when we consider the intelligence, experience, and character of someone who will hold the most powerful political office in the world, I think the first thing we notice about a potential candidate is their use their words.

Their words tell us who they are, what policies they plan to initiate, and the values, visions, and ideals they hold. Their words *also* tell us a great deal about their character, both explicitly and implicitly.



[Click picture](#). This is a short 2:07 minute compilation of 2016 presidential candidates insulting each other and squabbling like children.

As we know, this short video clip typifies the type of childish bickering that has dominated the presidential debates this year.

What kind of social reality are the candidates creating with their words? Are they acting like statesmen or are they more like cartoon characters or professional wrestlers threatening each other at Wrestlemania?

Do their words inspire hope, trust, peace, unity, and concern for the common good? Or do their words evoke division, strife, distrust, enmity, and anger?

I think we would all agree, that we should support someone who has the *dignity* and *stature* to hold the highest office of the greatest democracy in history.

Christians are guided by a different political and social vision than most of the current presidential candidate's project.

Titus 3:2. ¹ Remind them ... to be ready for every good work, ² to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. (NRSV)

B. Jesus, words, and political action

a. Was Jesus political?

Should Christians engage in political action or in the political process? We can answer that only if we look at Jesus and ask the same question.

Was Jesus concerned about politics? Did Jesus take political action? Whether one sees Jesus as political largely depends on how one defines politics.

If “politics” refers to “things related to the government”—seeking *to change governmental policy or to gain a government power or to overthrow the government*—then Jesus was not political.

If “politics” refers to “things related to society and social relationships”—seeking *to influence social values, customs, and practices*—then Jesus was a political activist.

Based on the second definition, Jesus was a political and social activist. For example, Jesus took social/political action when he feed the poor, healed the sick, and included outsiders in table fellowship. He took social/political action when he spoke against rich landowners exploiting the poor, against patriarchal power structures, and against religious practices that excluded people from worshiping.¹

b. Words help construct social/political reality

One of the most powerful ways Jesus influenced his social and political context was through words.

What we say influences other people. What we say influences social values, customs, and practices. What we say can shapes other people’s opinions, beliefs, how they vote, who the marry, what type of values and aspirations they have, even what they think and feel about themselves.

Our words, our speech, constructs and shapes our social world. Our words have impact; they have powerful social and political impact.

Our words matter. What’s more, we can never retract what we say. Even if we say something we regret, we cannot withdraw it, as if we never said it. At best, we can apologize, but we can never undo the impact that our words have on others or ourselves.

This is why I think Jesus taught that we would be judge by the words we speak.

¹ See Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006); R. David Kaylor, *Jesus the Prophet: His Vision of the Kingdom on Earth* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); William R. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2009).

Matt 12:36-37. ³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." (NRSV)

Once the word escapes our mouth, it is out of our control. Once the word escapes our mouth, it is like a bullet shot from a gun. The word we speak has the potential to "strike our target," if we have good trigger pull and sight alignment, or it can ricochet out of control, causing social mayhem and political massacre. What we say is as powerful as any weapon.

c. Plausibility structures²

Our words have tremendous impact on our worldviews. The words we use, and the words we hear from politicians, pundits, and the media, form and influence our worldviews.

A worldview is a fundamental orientation of our heart and mind that can be expressed as a story or a set of beliefs that may be true or false, conscious or unconscious about the world we live in that answers key questions:³

- what is real?
- what is the nature of reality?
- what is a human being?
- what happens at death?
- how do we know?
- what is right and wrong?
- does life have a purpose?

Worldviews are socially and verbally constructed. But not only that, they are socially confirmed. People require social confirmation for their beliefs. Beliefs are developed, maintained, and modified within a social context.

That social confirmation is called a "plausibility structure." Ideas and practices of a particular culture create conditions that shape what beliefs are plausible within a society.

²The following is from Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York: Doubleday, 1979).

³ James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue* (Fifth Edition, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

Some beliefs do not require social confirmation.

- If a person has a toothache, there is no need for social confirmation.
- The pain itself convinces us directly. No dentist, no friend can tell us that we have a toothache.
- Pain imposes its own plausibility. IT IS DIRECTLY CONFIRMED.

Other beliefs, ones that are most important to human beings, like political values, morality, and religion require social confirmation.

- Political, moral, and religious beliefs require particular social circumstances to develop and to be maintained.
- In order for such beliefs to emerge and remain plausible THEY MUST BE SOCIALLY CONFIRMED.

For example, the moral values of courage, honor, and loyalty would be common characteristics of the Marine Corps. As long as a person lives in the social context of the Marine Corps, it is likely that these values will be plausible and go unquestioned by individual Marines.

But if that Marine leaves that military environment—let's say they join a pacifist Mennonite Church—it is likely that his or her worldview will change. Why? Because the social environment has changed. The social environment is critical.

And that social environment, whether the Marine Corps or the Mennonite Church, is overwhelmingly shaped by what is said, read, or understood in those communities.

The point is, words shape our worldviews, our values, our behaviors, our attitudes, and our commitments.

C. Words can destroy, inflame, or inspire

1. The power of words

Our words have the power to destroy and the power to build up.

Proverbs 12:6. The words of the wicked are a deadly ambush, but the speech of the upright delivers them. (NRSV)

Proverbs 18:21. Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits. (NRSV)

The words we chose and use have tremendous power. Our words can be filled with love or hate, blessing or bitterness, compliments or complaining, victory or defeat.⁴

a. Words can destroy

Certain kinds of words can destroy relationships. What kinds of things or words emotionally hurt us?

- a. Gossip – destroying reputation, explain
- b. Judging/condemning – undermining people and projects
- c. Flattery – manipulation
- d. Bragging – putdowns
- e. Lying – fabrication
- f. Broken promises – creating false hope; making promises without any plans to fulfill those promises; leads to broken trust, broken relationships
- g. Slander – vituperation, insult, outburst, personal attacks; destroys relationships, trust, confidence; shows lack of respect

Such words create often cause emotional wounding. Emotional wounds are like physical wounds.⁵ Physical wounds can heal, but they often lead to scar tissue or disability. Physical wounds can be extremely sensitive. You don't want anyone poking around there. Similarly, emotional wounds caused by unkind words are painful, sensitive, can become infected, and cause lifelong emotional disability.

When I was a little boy, my mom would tell me, "Sticks and stones may break your bones, but name/words will never hurt you." Is that true? I don't think so. I would bet that if we went around the room, every one of you could remember something someone said to you when you were a child, or even as an adult, that hurt you. And that message, those words, play in the background of your mind even to this day.

⁴ Rewriting the phrase from "What does the Bible say about the power of words?"; <https://gotquestions.org/power-of-words.html>

⁵ Michael Schreiner, "Emotional Wounds are like Physical Wounds," September 17, 2015; <https://evolutioncounseling.com/emotional-wounds-are-like-physical-wounds/>

b. Words can inflame and manipulate

Most importantly in our current political climate is to address the issue of propaganda. Propaganda works by using words and stories to inflame our emotions and thus to feel, act, and behave in certain ways.

When our emotions are enflamed, more blood goes to our midbrain and less to our frontal cortex where thinking, planning, and good judgment happens. Words, stories, and images can inflame our emotions and passions, which tends to decrease our ability to think coolly and rationally.

In the political arena, demagogues use specific words or stories to inflame our emotions in order to manipulate us. Demagogues want to move us to accept their opinion or to take certain action that benefits the demagogue. They use a variety of communication techniques—usually words, stories, symbols, images—to create an *emotional appeal*. They want to bypass your ability to think critically or analytical thinking. This is propaganda.⁶

One of the most effective forms of propaganda is ***name calling***, which associates a person or idea with a negative symbol. For example, calling someone a “loser, commie, fascist, elitist, insider, etc.”

Another effective form of propaganda is making ***glittering generalities***, the opposite of name calling. It links a person or idea to a positive symbol. For example, calling someone “a winner, energetic, a genius, a millionaire,” or whatever virtue or character quality is valued in a particular culture.

Other types of words used to manipulate people—other forms of propaganda—include generating fear, lying or fabricating stories, making grandiose promises, convincing people that everyone else is doing it (bandwagon), using overgeneralizations and stereotyping (play to biases)—all with words.

Listen to what Donald Trump said:

“I play to people’s fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That’s why a little

⁶ The following is from: <http://www-tc.pbs.org/weta/reportingamericaatwar/teachers/pdf/propaganda.pdf>

hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole.”⁷

c. Words can inspire and encourage

Words also have the power to Think about a positive thing that someone told you about yourself. Grab a hold of that positive word for you. When you hear that positive thing that someone once told you, what comes to mind? How do you feel?

D. What does the Bible tell us about our use of words?

1. Speak with love

Words can also be used to inspire and build people up. Let’s look at Eph. 4:14-16.

Eph. 4:14-16. ¹⁴ We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (NRSV)

Scripture warns us not to be deceived by those who propagate error, who speak falsely, or who promote political propaganda—they are “crafty in their deceitful scheming.”

This does not refer to someone who unintentionally says an untruth, or to someone who is uninformed. Rather, this refers to people who are intentionally lying (the scammer, the cheater, or the con-artist).

In contrast, this text encourages us to “speak the truth.” It assumes there is truth, that the truth can be known and that truth resists and defeats “the spin zone.”

It means that we can know the truth (facts) of most matters, we can speak it, and we can speak it “in love,” or by means of love, not hate.

⁷ Donald Trump, *The Art of the Deal* (Ballantine Books, 2015) 58.

We don't use the truth as a weapon to hurt or harm, but to help and heal. Notice that this "speaking the truth in love" aims at building up the whole church with every member of the church working properly.

2. Speak grace to people

Now, let's look at Eph. 4:29-32.

Eph. 4:29-32. ²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (NRSV)

Notice how the talks about how our words can build up and can be a conduit of God's grace.

The word for "building up" (οἰκοδομή) is the same word used for building a building. Imagine your words helping to build up someone as if they were a building. When you speak, do your words provide concrete, a good foundation for a vast superstructure? Do you provide steel reinforcement, beautiful windows, spaciousness, room to grow?

The word for "grace" (χάρις) means graciousness, favor, care. The word is usually associated with God's grace and power. When we speak to people, this text suggests that we can convey the love, care, and power of God to that person. We can *speak grace to people*, if we want. And when we do, we are cooperating with the most power and benevolent force in the universe, namely, God, to positively, even permanently contribute that that person's well-being.

Notice that this text also suggests that we also have the power to harm people with "evil talk" (λόγος σαπρὸς)—literally words that are "decayed, rotten, unusable"—we can grieve the Holy Spirit! Our negative talk, our "foul, unpleasant, or rotten"

words, our “bitter, angry, and slanderous” words, can oppose the grace of God meant for other people.

What are your words doing?

Speaking grace to people
(Eph. 4:29b)



Do your words promote
the fruit of the Spirit
in others? (Gal 5:22-23)

love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness,
generosity, faithfulness,
gentleness, self-control

Speaking with evil words
(Eph. 4:29a)



Do your words promote
the works of the flesh
in others? (Gal. 5:19-21)

fornication, impurity,
licentiousness, idolatry,
sorcery, enmities,
strife, jealousy,
anger, quarrels,
dissensions, actions,
envy, drunkenness, carousing

3. Speak the truth

Let's turn to what Jesus said about the importance of truth-telling.

Matt 5:33-37. ³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴ But [and] I say to you, Do not swear [oaths] at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one. (NRSV)

An oath is a solemn pledge to tell the truth, especially in a court of law. Jesus is not talking about “swearing” in the sense of saying, “Oh, my God!”—which is not unimportant, but it’s not what Jesus is talking about here.

Jesus is addressing dishonesty. What’s wrong with being dishonest?

- Distrust ruins relationships.
- Distrust creates disorder, insecurity, and anxiety.
- It ruins *outer peace*.
- Distrust also ruins *inner peace*.
- When we are untrustworthy, our own positive self-regard is threatened.

In contrast, Jesus is insisting on honesty that builds trust within society.

- Trust creates a sense of order, security, and serenity.
- Honesty invites peaceful and just relationships, which gives us peace of mind.

What kind of world would you like to live in? What kind of world would you rather create? A world of distrust and dishonesty? Or a world of trust and truth-telling? How we use our words answers that question. Do we use our words to build trust or to tear it down?

4. Our words reveal our hearts

Luke 6:43-45. ⁴³ "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; ⁴⁴ for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵ The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. (NRSV)

D. Presidential Politics

We cannot avoid politics. We are all political in that the words we express have social impact. Our words help shape social reality for good or for ill.

If our attitudes are shaped by the words of Scripture, then we are led to believe that our words have the power to help heal and help our world, no matter how

small our world is (just a few friends) or how big our world is (millions of Twitter, Facebooks, and YouTube followers).

If our attitudes are shaped by the words of Scripture, then we are led to believe that most of the presidential candidates—but not all—use their words, their political discourse, to manipulate their hearers, to create division, to enflame passions, to slander and deride their opponents, to engage in fact-free discourse, which the Bible calls lying, to exaggerate their own power and reputation, to say whatever it takes to win, or something like that.

If our attitudes are shaped by the words of Scripture, then we are also led to believe that there is truth, that we can speak the truth, that we can speak in the power of the Spirit, that we can speak the truth compassionately and confidently, that we can speak the truth in a way that builds up people, that our words have the power to heal and help people, to redeem and reconcile people, to build trust, true community, a better political world.